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# Two Kinds Of Trouble

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*Two Kinds Of Trouble*

A Novel by Rebecca Minnich

March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the requirements for a  
degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of New York

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August, 10, 1977 – Madison, Wisconsin

## **Chapter One**

“Does he have to move out? Can’t you make up? Are you sure? Did you try?”

These are the questions Patty asked her mother.

“Sweetie, yes. And I don’t expect you to understand. It’s just the way it has to be,” said Gloria. Her voice was cracking, her glasses fogging behind the wet dish towel in her hand, wrapped around red knuckles, rubbing a plate dry.

“It’s all our fault,” said Patty’s brother, David, who was leaning over the back of a chair with his head in his hands like he was on a soap opera. “If we hadn’t been such rotten kids, this wouldn’t have happened.”

Patty looked at David to see if he was serious. God, he was. She had heard about this. Children blaming themselves for their parents’ divorce. She had seen it on an ABC After-School Special. She had heard it was “normal” and a “common reaction.”

“No, it *isn’t* our fault, David,” she said. “They weren’t fighting about *us*.”

The eyes of their dog, Jinx looked up at Patty from under the dinner table. Could he tell what was going on? Was that why his eyes looked so sad? Or did he just want the last scraps of meat loaf on her plate? Without even knowing she was doing it, Patty found herself dipping her napkin in her water glass and wiping the smears off the vinyl placemat in front of her.

“Clean something. That’s what I do, too.” She looked up at Dad, who had said it. His eyes were blinking hard. She knew what he meant. He meant *That’s what I do, too, when something is just so totally awful that there’s nothing to do.*

She wanted to disappear, to sink into a hole, to become a cat or a dog – too stupid to understand what was going on. And now, just to make everything extra horrible, her brother had become an After School Special kid. And he was the *older* one -- he was about to turn fourteen next month. Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Shouldn’t he be the one telling *her* about life?

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Two weeks later, their dad moved into a “fully furnished” apartment near James Madison park. The carpeting in the hallway had mysterious spill stains the size of trash can lids. The apartment doors were painted pumpkin orange and had smeared peepholes that you couldn’t see through. The living room set was two dingy yellow-and-green chairs with foam rubber poking out of the cushions and a couch where you could feel the plywood through the arm when you sat on it. David and Patty had to bring their sleeping bags when they spent the night there. Dad said it was just for a little while.

“Why don’t you make yourself at home, kids? I’ll order a pizza.” Dad tripped over the phone cord that was stretched across the living room floor. Back at their house they had four phones. He only had one. Dad punched in the number, reading it off a menu stuck to the fridge with a magnet. David watched him sideways. The kitchen was practically empty; just a couple of plates and glasses, and hardly any food. Dad’s whiskers were sticking out all over like he’d forgotten to shave and he kept wrapping the phone cord around his thumb, something he never normally did. When he got off the

phone his eyes kept darting back and forth to Patty, to the walls, the floor, to David once, but David wasn't looking at him anymore. He was pulling little chips of foam rubber out of the hole in the couch arm.

“Well, there's the TV,” Dad said, and kind of waved at it behind him. Patty figured this was her cue to go turn it on, so she did.

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He used to slip little comic strips under her door late at night. *Bunny's Revenge!* one comic was called. A cute little bunny with a fluffy cotton tail in the first panel; in the next, it grew giant fangs and claws. The bunny was coming for their cat, Mimi, who loved to devour the tiny baby rabbits that appeared in the back yard every spring. It ended with Mimi treed on the roof of the house crying for mercy while the bunnies bore fierce teeth and threw bunny poop at her from below. The comics were goofy and fabulous, full of cartoon animals and half-dirty words. David never got comics under his door. Dad only made them for Patty. Patty never showed them to anybody. She never saw him making them. She always found them in the morning, so she figured he must have drawn them in his study at night, when he was supposed to be writing, when nobody was allowed to knock or interrupt him for any reason.

She wanted to ask him what would happen to the comics now. Who would slide pictures under her door at night, now? Nobody, probably. Mom didn't understand comics. She didn't even read them in the Sunday paper. Not even Peanuts. She wanted to ask Dad what she should do with the comics he'd made for her. Save them forever,

because she'd probably never get another one? But that seemed the wrong thing to ask, and she didn't know how to ask it anyway. More and more things were becoming things not to talk about.

Dad's visits were every Saturday at 1:00. He usually took David and Patty out to Pizza Hut or to the Plaza Bar and Grill where they would eat cheeseburgers and fries, and Dad would teach them how to play pool. Patty got pretty good at the bank shot after a while. It was weird, in a way, spending all that time with him. He hung a few pictures on the walls of the apartment and that made it better. But it still had a kind of sad smell – like somebody else's stale cooking.

“So, when do you guys start school?” Dad asked one Saturday night, not to either one of them in particular. He was unwrapping some Jell-o cups for dessert. Patty was peeling off the bits of hardened cheese from the inside lid of the pizza box on the counter.

“Right after my birthday. Last week of August. Don't you even know?” asked David. He was trying to get the loose knob back on the stove, the one that kept falling off. Dad looked at him, but David didn't look back. The knob needed all of his attention.

“Mine is a day later. 'cause it's a different school,” said Patty.

“I know it's a different school, honey,” said Dad. He handed her a green Jell-o and his eyes looked sad and a little red around the edges. “Seventh grade already, wow.”

“Yeah, wow,” said David, who'd already done seventh grade so obviously it was no big deal to him.

“Well,” said Dad, handing David an orange Jell-o and wiping his wet hands on the tail of his shirt, “New schools for both of you. Should be an adventure!”

“Yep. I guess,” said Patty. They both dug into their Jell-o. David didn’t say anything. From the other room, Walter Cronkite’s voice was going on about people dying in Bangladesh. David walked out, eating his Jell-o.

“Where are you going?” asked Dad.

“Watch the news. I gotta be informed, you know.”

When Patty looked up, Dad was rubbing his eyes in circles with his fingers.

“Dad? Is it okay if I--”

“Sure, go ahead,” he sighed.

\*\*\*\*

Mom said there was another woman. She said the other woman was someone who’d been over to their house a few times. A friend, even, who Mom was now calling “that backstabbing bitch.” Dad didn’t mention anything about her, and Patty figured that that was one of the things on the big, growing list of things not to talk about. It wasn’t a real list, of course. Just a big empty space growing between all of them, a blank, like an erased blackboard.

“They were messing around for months, you know? Did you know that?” Gloria was taking the spices out of the spice rack, opening their greasy caps and sniffing them one by one, tossing out ones the didn’t measure up for some reason. She had sent David upstairs to take a shower. That meant she could tell Patty everything she was *really* thinking. Patty concentrated on being a good listener. That was one of her goals. She wanted her friends to say about her that she was a Good Listener.

“You mean, like, having an affair?”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Right in front of me. I must be some kind of idiot not to have seen it. You think somebody is your friend. Your *friend*.”

Gloria refilled her glass with brandy for the third time since Patty had sat down in the kitchen. Patty wondered who the other woman was. There were so many friends. Family friends, peace movement friends, political campaign friends. Her mom had been a leader in the Democratic party until she got too busy with all the house renovations. All the dinner parties, cocktail parties and meetings and people coming over blurred together in Patty’s memory. She had to imagine a mush of various women’s faces to make up the face of this other woman.

“Yeah, that’s pretty horrible. I mean, considering that she was your friend.”

“Yes, sweetie. It is. I can only hope to God you don’t ever go through something like this.”

Patty didn’t want to think about the other woman at all. But her mother was confiding in her now, and that meant Patty had to do her best to try to act as grown up as possible. Gloria didn’t confide in David – Patty knew that. Even though Patty was the younger one, she must have had some kind of special ability or something, or at least her mom thought she did. She didn’t want to screw it up by saying something stupid or babyish.

After all, there was no need to be a baby about it. Divorce was a totally normal thing. Lots of kids’ parents were getting them, more all the time. It was spreading that year like the bubonic plague or something. Patty knew all about bubonic plague now, from a book that David was reading and telling her about every night. How this one disease killed almost half of Europe six centuries ago. There was *no cure* and nobody

could stop it. Boom, you're next. Patty had been checking in the mirror every morning for bulges under the armpit, the first symptom.

"Dad says he's gonna get a new apartment," Patty said, opening the fridge.

Gloria turned to her, staring. "Why? So she can move in with him?"

Patty thought for a moment. She didn't want to say the wrong thing. "He didn't say anything about that. He says when the money starts coming in from his new book. He's gonna move, that's all."

"Well, why doesn't the lying whore fork over some cash from her uptight, rich East Coast family?" Gloria swiped a tear from the corner of her eye and clapped a jar of turmeric onto the counter. A little yellow cloud poofed out. Patty thought about mustard gas, like her uncle had told them that the Germans used in World War II. She imagined the poison cloud spreading over the battlefield, imagined it would be yellow like that. Everyone choking to death.

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When they first moved into the house, back when they were still all together, Dad was covered with dust and paint most of the time. The floors had to be sanded and finished, the wallpaper steamed and stripped, old carpeting ripped out, walls and ceilings painted. They had never owned a house before, and this one was huge.

"I almost don't even want to *tell* people what we paid for it," Gloria would say to friends. "If it hadn't been for Bob and Ida, we'd still be renting."

"They gave you a deal, huh?"

“I know it sounds nuts, but they didn’t want to sell to strangers. They offered to bring the price down to whatever we could afford.”

Bob and Ida were an old couple, and Gloria had helped Bob get elected alderman seven years before; before he got sick with whatever he was sick with. He was a bent-over tower, about six-foot-four, but Gloria said he used to be taller. He stood almost two feet over his wife, Ida’s wispy white head. Patty and David were told not to stare at Bob’s right hand, which he always kept in his trouser pocket to hide the shaking. He had some kind of disease that Patty could never remember the name of. The coins in his pocket would jangle, his elbow noodling back and forth as he spoke. He had designed the house himself, so the countertops, doorways, faucets, ceilings and sinks were all set about six inches higher than normal. Patty became an expert at climbing up onto the countertops to reach glasses in the kitchen cabinets. Gloria, who was just a little over five feet, was constantly dragging step-stools from place to place.

The house had more rooms than they could live in, more rooms than they knew what to do with. Four bedrooms, a living room, dining room, family room and study. When they first moved into the house, while Dad and Mom were busy scraping, painting, sweeping, Patty would go around exploring all the empty rooms, rooms waiting for furniture, for people to live in them. She loved the hollow sound of her footsteps, the echo as she opened and closed each door. The amazing feeling that it was all theirs. Not a landlord’s – theirs.

Each room led to the other through connected doorways. Patty could walk from her room, through Mom and Dad’s room, through the guest room and finally to David’s room without entering the hallway. She could walk into one room and shut the doors and

nobody would be able to find her for hours. She liked to sit in one of the empty rooms on a sunny windowsill and look out into the yard. Sometimes when she did, the air would grow heavy behind her, kind of thickening and pressing on her back. It would feel like somebody was standing there, watching. She would look over her shoulder, but there was never anything to see. Just a bare room, sunlight, emptiness.

Every room had two to three doors and every door had a key, attached to an enormous key ring that Bob had presented to Gloria and Ted when they signed the papers. The key ring was as wide as Patty's palm and she counted sixteen keys on it. Long, black, iron keys like something in an old Dracula movie. She liked to try them out one by one, poking them into the keyholes below the heavy glass doorknobs, trying the rattling locks, to see which one fit where. She never did figure them all out.

Now with Dad gone, the house seemed bigger than ever.

"We're going to make the best of it," said Gloria. She was using her *keep your sunny side up* voice now. Back straight, chin up.

"Don't forget, we're still a family," she reminded them. She was handing David table cloths and sheets from a box that has been sitting unpacked in the living room for the last five months. David was standing on a chair, putting the linens on the upper shelves of the closet.

"Yeah, just like *The Brady Bunch*," he said. "Only there's less of us, instead of more."

"If that's supposed to be funny, it isn't," said Gloria.

Patty wanted to laugh, but didn't want to spoil her mom's mood. *The Brady Bunch* was the stupidest program on TV. About a divorced couple, each with three kids.

They get married and have a perfect, stupid life together in a beautiful, modern house with their own maid. Patty was only twelve, and even she knew it was totally unrealistic. The worst thing that ever happened to them was when Jan had to get braces. She cried and cried. Braces. Patty's family couldn't afford to get her braces. Apparently they cost thousands of dollars. Patty had to have a cheap, pink, plastic thing cemented onto her bottom teeth to push into place the upper teeth that were tilting in the wrong direction. It made her look like she was always chewing a big piece of pink bubble gum. She wiggled at it every day until she managed to get it loose, then pried it out so she could take it out when she wasn't in the mood to look like a freak. The dentist yelled at her when she went back for the next appointment, Then he made her a new pink thing, even bigger and uglier, and cemented that one in. It made her sound like a cartoon character with a speech impediment. This time she used a butter knife to pry it out, and got it off in one day. After that, her parents gave up trying to straighten her teeth.

“What I mean is, we're just as much a family - even with your father gone—” Gloria's voice cracked on *gone*, but she swallowed and went on. “I don't want you to think we're any less a family just because there are only three of us now.” She took off her glasses and wiped them, which meant she was starting to cry.

“He's just on the other side of town. It's not like he's dead,” said Patty. Gloria looked at her like she wanted to argue about this, but didn't really know how. The thin little brown wisps of hair were sticking to her forehead in the mid-August heat. She'd pinned her hair up off her ears even though it was almost too short to hold a bobby pin, but she couldn't stand any of it to be sticking to her cheeks. Patty wasn't sweating at all and wondered why the heat bothered her mother so much. She figured it was probably

because she was just bigger all over. There was a roundness to all the parts of her mother, but not Patty. Gloria always told her, “you’re going to grow up tall and skinny like your father. Nobody’d guess you were my kid at all.” And then she’d look at Patty and shake her head, and what was Patty supposed to say to that, anyway? As if she could do anything about being a scrawny, nothing-blonde, little shrimp who would never look anything like her pretty, curvy, big-busted mother.

“Hey look what’s up here!” David’s poked his nose above the top shelf of the closet, and reached into the darkness at the back of it. He pulled out the biggest knife Patty had ever seen.

“My God, David – that’s a *machete!*” said Gloria. She made him give it to her, even though he felt the edge with his finger and said it wouldn’t even cut cheese, it was so dull. She took it downstairs to the basement to wrap it in rags and throw it in a trash can, Patty and David following behind the whole way, offering theories.

“Maybe Bob killed somebody with it and hid it from the cops!” David suggested.

“Maybe a murderer tried to break in, and Bob fought him off and took the murder weapon, and kept it for evidence!” said Patty.

“Kids, stop it! I’m sure Bob just brought it back as a crazy souvenir from one of his trips to the Caribbean.”

This wasn’t nearly as exciting, and they both felt a little disappointed by the dull thud of the blade hitting the bottom of the trash can. They all stood around looking at it for a few seconds.

“Well?” asked Gloria, “What do you all want for dinner?”

## Chapter Two

It was Friday, and Gloria was feeding chunks of steak into the meat grinder, the beef coming out like an army of pink worms into a steel bowl.

“Where’s he taking you tomorrow?” Gloria asked.

“I don’t know,” said Patty.

“Well, he must have something planned -- he said to pack your bathing suits.”

“I guess.”

“What do you mean, you guess? Doesn’t your father tell you his plans? Don’t you even know if he’s taking you up to the Dells, or the Apple River, or just to that beach at James Madison where the kids are always getting high and drowning?” She chopped a rind of fat off the hunk of beef with a butcher knife and poked it into the meat grinder.

“I’d take you somewhere nice, too, if I had a goddamn *car*. But of course, *he* got the car.”

“I thought you didn’t have a driver’s license, Mom.”

“That’s not the *point*.” The muscles in her right arm bulged as she worked the crank, the pink worms practically flying out now. Like they were trying to escape her. Her glasses were smudged with beef fat.

Patty wished David were there so she wouldn’t have to answer all of Gloria’s questions, but David had shut himself in his room again. If anybody wanted to talk to him, they had to go find him.

It turned out that where Dad was taking them the next day was to her apartment. The other woman’s. Her name was Lorraine. She lived in an upstairs apartment on the far West side. Her two kids were there, too, and Patty remembered them when she saw them.

They had been at a two different parties at their house. Kids a little bit younger than her and David. They both had the same face: big, round brown eyes, blonde hair. But not the straight, whitish blonde like her and David had. Their hair was almost brown, falling in tousled curls across their foreheads. When Patty and David walked into their living room for the first time, both were wearing pajama bottoms and t-shirts with food stains. They were on the couch eating Cap'n Crunch with Crunchberries and watching the Flintstones.

“Hi,” said Patty.

“Hi,” they both said in unison. The girl wiped a dribble of Crunchberry-pink milk from her chin and squinted at Patty. The boy barely glanced up. David looked at the floor, hands in his pockets, running his bare toes over the head of a nail sticking out.

“Kids, this is Patty and David, Ted’s kids. Did you say hi the them?” Lorraine’s voice was like music, like a kindergarten teacher singing from a book.

“Yeah,” said the boy, not taking his eyes off the Flintstones. He spooned in another mouthful of cereal and belched.

“Patty, David, this is Sarah and Todd.”

“Hi,” said Patty again. Sarah kept staring at Patty. Todd kept staring at the TV.

“Todd means death in German,” said David, still picking at the nail with his toe.

Todd looked away from the TV, first at David, then at his mom. He took the spoon out of his mouth. “No, it doesn’t. That’s a total lie!”

“Is not.”

“Why don’t you kids all sit and watch TV together? Ted and I are just going to be in the kitchen.” Lorraine turned to leave.

“Mom – Mom, wait!” Todd set down his bowl, spilling the pink milk over the brim, and ran after Lorraine. “That’s not true, is it? My name doesn’t mean death in German! Mom?”

Patty pushed David’s shoulder, but he still didn’t look up from the floor. “Why do you have to be such a butthead all the time?” she whispered.

“Shut up,” he said, and went over to pet a fat, orange cat on the window sill.

Patty went over and sat on the far end of the couch. Sarah studied her movements. She set down her bowl and picked up the box of cereal from the floor. She had Winnie-the-Pooh and Tigger and Crunchberry crumbs all over her pajama bottoms. She tipped the box forward and peered inside for a better view, pulled out a Crunchberry, and stared at Patty as she ate it.

“What grade are you in?” Sarah asked.

“Sixth. I mean, it’s gonna be seventh. How about you?”

“Gonna be in fifth.”

“You at Dudgeon?” Patty asked.

“Yeah.”

“We used to call it Dungeon.”

“Ha ha, like everybody doesn’t still call it that.”

“I guess they’ve been calling it that for a million years.”

“Two million.” Sarah reached out a fist with a Crunchberry clutched inside and handed it to Patty. Patty wanted it, but she wasn’t sure. Sarah’s hands didn’t look all that clean, and she smelled a little bit like pee.

“That’s okay, I just ate breakfast.”

Lorraine came in from the kitchen. “Okay, kids!” She was smiling like she really meant it, like one of those ladies on Sesame Street. She was tall and pretty, with long, light brown hair. Just a little too hip to be a grownup. “We’re going to the beach, so Sarah and Todd, get your swimming suits on, and Patty and David, if you want anything to eat, now is the time – you don’t want to get a cramp later.”

Somehow, she made it sound like avoiding cramps was the funnest thing ever. Gloria never even mentioned swimming cramps. Was it possible she didn’t *care* if Patty and David got a cramp and drowned? What *were* cramps, anyway?

“Yay!” Sarah shot up and began jumping up and down on the couch, knocking the cereal box to the floor. The cat scrambled away. Todd ran from the kitchen and into his room and slammed the door.

David joined Patty on the couch and they waited. They already had their swimming suits on under their clothes. They took over watching the Flintstones. Fred and Wilma were getting dressed up to go to some party at the water buffalo lodge. Patty rescued the cereal box from under the table and she and David took turns fishing out the Crunchberries and eating them.

“God, I wish Mom would buy us Cap’n Crunch,” said David.

“I know – they eat it like it’s totally normal for them.”

Patty and David’s parents talked about sugar cereals like it was the same thing as feeding their kids insecticide. Of course, this didn’t stop Patty and David from begging for Sugar Smacks, Froot Loops, and Frosted Flakes at every trip to the grocery store. They always believed they could get their parents to cave in if they just begged hard enough. After many screaming matches in the breakfast aisle, the cereal war ended in a

kind of truce where they were each allowed one sugar cereal exactly once a year: on their birthdays. Patty always got Apple Jacks and David usually got Cap'n Crunch, sometimes Cocoa Puffs.

Sarah ran out, now wearing an orange bathing suit and blue shorts with the fly hanging open. She took Patty by the hand and pulled her to her room.

“Come on, I wanna show you something.”

“What?”

“Something I invented, just come and see.”

Sarah's room was a disaster of stuffed animals, colored felt-tip markers, comic books and Mad magazines scattered all over the floor. A huge and creepy collection of plastic trolls were lined up on the dresser, their pink, yellow, and blue hair flying, beady, lidless eyes staring.

“How can you sleep with them things looking at you?” Patty asked.

Sarah giggled, “I dunno.” Ratty curls of hair fell into her eyes as she pulled a 45 record out of a box and put it on the record player. It was a kids-style record player, the kind Patty had grown out of two years ago. As the needle dropped, the opening notes of the Captain and Tenille's *Muskrat Love* filled the room. Patty groaned.

“Oh my God, don't tell me you actually *like* this song?”

“No, watch, just watch!” Sarah jumped to the middle of the room and began to do a kind of muskrat dance, waving her arms like paws, wiggling her skinny butt, making kissy faces and chittery rodent noises. The dance involved jumping on every surface of the bedroom, including, at one point, the dresser, scattering the trolls. She mimed the

action of the song perfectly in time to the lyrics. By the time she got to *now he's tickling her fancy/rubbing her toes*, Patty was laughing so hard, she could barely breathe.

“Oh, my god, you are such a little weirdo!” Patty threw a stuffed kangaroo at her.

“Thank you. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.” Sarah stood in the middle of the bed, like she was on American Bandstand, taking bow after bow.

“Kids, the bus is leaving! All aboard!” Lorraine called out from the other room.

They had an actual bus, a red Volkswagen bus with a sliding door on the side. It was big enough for all four of them to sit in the back, plus get up and move around, change places, hit each other, or whatever they wanted to do. David was the last one in, and was having trouble with the door.

“You have to yank on it, like this,” Todd leaned over, grabbed it from him and flung his entire weight behind the handle and slam-shoved it closed. “But I guess you wouldn't know how to do it, if you only had a normal car. Or *no* car. Hey, I hear you guys don't even *have* a car.” Todd leaned back against a rolled-up sleeping bag and glared at David. “Is that right?”

“That's right, Death.”

“It's *spelled* different, asshole! Right Mom?”

“Right, Mom?” David mocked Todd in a perfect nasal whine while unrolling a window. Patty put her arm over her face to cover the laugh. Sarah looked at her and laughed, too. Todd turned around and kicked Sarah hard. She screamed and began crying.

“Don't swear, kids. And no hitting. Let's all try to be nice, shall we?” Lorraine said without turning around, still with that sunny, Sesame Street voice. “Ted, sweetie, can you light me a cigarette?”

Did she really just call Dad “sweetie?” Patty tried to remember if her mom had ever called him that. Lorraine was actually *driving* the van, behind the wheel of that massive machine, her soft, long hair blowing in the summer breeze. Patty couldn’t remember ever seeing a woman drive such a big vehicle. And she’d *never* seen Dad in the passenger seat before. The whole thing was weird, like they were all in the Twilight Zone suddenly, where moms drove buses and named their kids Death, and talked in happy voices no matter what was happening around them.

At the beach, Sarah tagged after Patty, scuffling her bare feet in the sand. She followed her into the green, cool lake, to the snack bar for fudgecicles, even to the bathrooms. She talked constantly – about music, about comics, about her troll collection. It was like she’d been locked in a cardboard box for a week and was finally allowed to speak. David stayed on his Speed Racer beach towel, reading *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. Todd slipped under the water and didn’t come up for a long time. He had a pair of plastic goggles he was trying out, popping his head up to the surface every few minutes to yell to his mother about everything he was seeing on the bottom of the lake.

“So, like, what do you like better, popcicles or fudgecicles?” Sarah asked. She was hopping behind Patty like a kangaroo, sending up little clouds of sand. Patty held her fudgecicle a little higher out of the way.

“I don’t know. Depends on what mood I’m in.”

“Me, too. For popcicles, I like orange best, what do you like?”

Patty liked orange best, too, but was afraid of what Sarah would do if she admitted it. Make them blood sisters for life, probably. Total best friends for eternity.

Even after being in the lake, Sarah still somehow smelled like pee. She must have zero pee control, Patty thought.

“Depends on my mood.” Patty stopped and peeled a little more of the paper from the fudgecicle. It was still misted with frost on the bottom part, her tongue stuck to it dangerously. She liked the feeling of just leaving it there, not daring to pull, letting it the frozen chocolate melt sweetly on the surface of her tongue. Then she noticed Lorraine and Dad. They were sitting very close together on the beach blanket. Lorraine had her hand on his thigh; his actual white, hairy *thigh*. Then he leaned over and kissed her neck. The strap of her bright green swimming suit with the low back flapped down, exposing the pink shoulder, the white line where the strap had been.

“Oh my God,” Patty said, her tongue ripping from the fudgecicle.

“Ooh, are they making out again? Gross, isn’t it?” said Sarah. “They’re always doing it. You should hear them at night – it’s disgusting.”

Patty’s stomach puckered shut, and suddenly she didn’t want the fudgecicle anymore. She turned her whole body around and tried to look at a group of kids digging in the sand behind them -- not really seeing them. For a while, she didn’t say anything. Sarah dug into the sand with her toes.

“Do they really? I mean...a lot?” Patty asked.

“It’s sooo gross,” said Sarah. “I don’t know why *anybody* wants to have a boyfriend, especially if they’re gonna be all hairy like that. And my Mom in that swimming suit – doesn’t she even know how fat her butt is? Yuck - I don’t want to talk about it. Come on, let’s go in the water.”

Patty followed Sarah, trying to remember if she'd ever seen Gloria's hand on her father's thigh, ever seen the strap of her swimming suit come down. She'd never even thought of her father *having* thighs. She stood in the water, watching Sarah splashing and flinging up little strings of water-weeds with her toes. Patty wondered if she could swim to the other side of the lake stay there, live like Huckleberry Finn in a little shack made of tree branches, fish for bluegills and eat the roots she dug up. Never come back.

She handed Sarah the rest of her fudgecicle. "Here, you can have it. I'm gonna go talk to David for a minute."

"Really? Wow! Thanks." Sarah took the last bite and then, for some strange reason, washed the empty stick in the water, like a raccoon. She began to follow Patty back up the beach.

"Just wait here a minute, okay? I need to talk to David." She tried not to sound mean. Sarah stopped at the edge of the wet sand, her round stomach pooched out against her orange swimming suit, leaning forward, fighting the momentum of her body's desire to keep following Patty. Her eyes fell to her feet.

"I'll be right back," said Patty over her shoulder.

David's back was a deep brown. A line of tiny, blonde, downy hairs gathered at the small of it, pointing along the spine in a downward arrow to his cut-off denim shorts. A few drops of water fell from Patty onto him.

"Watch it, man. You get sand on me, I'll kill you."

She crouched down next to him, spoke in a whisper.

"They're making out. I'm not kidding you, they're totally making out."

David looked up at her, blue eyes through the strings of pale blonde hair hanging down, hair that would never stay in place. He didn't move, didn't change expression, his lips were tightly shut.

"What do you want me to do about it?" he said, finally. She wanted to kick him. Why did he have to be like this all the time? She didn't even know why she told him, *what* she wanted him to do. But not this, not look at her like she was just a pain in the butt, like a dead fly in his coke.

"I don't know."

"If you don't like it, don't look at them. You see *me* looking at them? Hell, it's not my problem you didn't bring anything to do." He went back to reading his book.

Patty stood up and looked behind her. Sarah was still staring at her, waiting on the shoreline.

"Do you think it's true?" she asked. "What Mom said? That they were doing this before? Before the divorce, I mean, because Mom said--"

David flung the book face-down in the sand, turned and sat up, all in one movement. His eyes flamed up at her. He was the one whispering now, but he somehow made it a yell.

"I don't give a *shit* what Mom said, okay? I don't *care* what they're doing. So change the subject, or get the hell away from me, you get it?"

Patty took a step back in the sand, and another. She turned and ran back to Sarah.

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Later that night, Patty was looking in the mirror for sunburn. Her shoulder blades were itchy with something. Gloria passed by the bathroom, she stopped and turned around.

“You got a little pink, kiddo.”

“Really? It’s so far back, it’s hard to see.”

Gloria got some Solarcaine lotion out of the medicine cabinet and spread a squirt of it on Patty’s back, her hands were gentle and sure of themselves. Patty sighed into the coolness of it. She was looking forward to sleeping.

“So, you met her?”

“Who?”

“You know who I mean.” Gloria’s voice dropped a few notes.

“You mean Lorraine? Yeah. She was there.”

Gloria snapped the lid of the lotion bottle shut and put it away.

“So what do you think?”

“She’s okay, I guess. She’s nice.”

Gloria stepped out into the hallway and looked down the stairs, her arms folded.

“We worked together on the McGovern campaign, you know. She organized the door-to-door canvassing for the West Side, I don’t know if you remember.”

Patty didn’t really remember Lorraine. There were so many people in and out of the McGovern campaign headquarters. Two whole years of their life were the McGovern campaign. Patty practically lived in the office, stuffing envelopes, counting stacks of leaflets, running around, sneaking cups of sugary coffee from the endless pot in the corner. It was where she had learned how to understand grown-up speech. It was how she

learned that your guy doesn't always win the election. In fact, sometimes he gets totally creamed.

“So her husband left her, not even five months after the election. Mind-blowing. You get up from one kick in the teeth and then comes another. But that's how life is.”

Gloria leaned against the wall, the floorboards creaked a little under her. “So we reached out to her. We made sure to invite her to everything, because that's what you do, you know, after what we'd all been through together. And then to think, that whole time, she was--”

Gloria cut herself off, biting down on the last word. She went into her bedroom and came back with a lit cigarette and an ashtray. She sat down on the top step of the staircase, her back to Patty, looking down the long stairwell, white on one side, pink on the other. Dad had meant to finish the paint job, but he'd never gotten around to it. There were still the ragged ends of brush strokes around the edges.

“That woman *pretended* to be my friend. All so she could get into his pants.”

Patty rolled her eyes, glad her mother's back was to her. She didn't want to think any more about her dad's pants. She wondered how long she would have to stand there listening before she could go back to her room and shut the door.

“I hope to God, honey, that you never have to know how this feels. To be betrayed like this by a friend.” Gloria looked up at Patty, her eyes red and tearing. Her fingers trembled as she drew on the cigarette. She sighed the smoke into the stairwell.

Patty said nothing.

“I suppose it’s important that you get along with her, though. Who knows? She might end up being your stepmother.” Gloria tapped the ash off the end of the cigarette. *Stepmother*. The word sent an electric shock across all the hairs of Patty’s arms.

“It’s late, sweetie, why don’t you go on to bed? I’m going to fix a gin and tonic.” Gloria stood up kissed Patty’s forehead and took the ashtray down the stairs.

Long after everyone was asleep, Patty’s dreams were broken by a loud clacking noise. She sat up and looked around the dark room. At first she couldn’t place the sound. It was familiar, but her mind was foggy from sleep and she couldn’t see where it was coming from. Then she saw it. On her dresser top, silhouetted against the glow a streetlight coming in from the window. It was David’s steel ball-clacker. One of those things where you have five hanging steel balls in a row; you pick up a ball from the end and let it drop, and it sends the one on the other end flying up.

*Clack clack clack clack clack.*

Who had started it going? There was nobody.

*Clack clack clack clack clack clack clack.*

She pulled the sheet up to her nose. Hadn’t it been hot when she got into bed? Why was it suddenly cold in the room? There was no breeze stirring the curtains. She felt like one of the balls in the middle, afraid to move, the sound pounding on her skull from the outside.

*Clack...clack...clock...clock...clock.*

It was slowing down now. What if it woke her mother up? She slipped out of bed and walked over to the dresser.

*Clock...clock...cluck...cl--*

She caught the end ball between her fingers and it all stopped. The heavy silence, the listening silence filled the room, pressing in on her. Her heart pounded in her ears, replacing the rhythm of the balls. She picked up the thing from its wooden base and tiptoed down the hall to David's room. His door was open a crack. He was snoring loudly, his sheets kicked into a rope tangled around his long legs. He would kill her if she woke him up. She set the ball clacker amid the mess on his dresser, hoping he wouldn't notice if it was out of place.

She passed the stairwell, not wanting to look down its dark, silent depths, but she did, anyway. It was always dark at the bottom of the stairs this time of night, but now there was something different. The darkness had gotten thick somehow, taken on color. Kind of purplish. Something in the middle of the purple, in the deepest, plumb-black of it was shimmering, like someone had tossed glitter dust into it. Then it was gone, and she could see the dim wall behind it again. She ran back into her room and shut the door. Her back was wet with sweat.

### Chapter Three

The thing about middle school was the total hugeness of it. The school had only two floors, but was stretched out so far in all directions that Patty felt like she was alone in the desert, or lost at sea, with no view of the horizon.

Her mom had bought her a dress for the first day, which right away she regretted. It had a pretty green flower pattern, but it was a like a little girl dress. She could hear other girls snickering as she walked by, the hem of the skirt flicking against her knees stiffly. They were all wearing the same summer chinos and knit tops as if they all had some catalog Patty had never seen. The year before, in sixth grade, she hadn't really thought much about clothes. Now, every day, whatever she wore seemed suddenly completely stupid.

There was a definite order of popularity at the school, and before the first week was done, Patty knew who she was going to have trouble with.

*"Love the pig-tails!"* Three girls who were simultaneously combing back their feathered hairdos in front of the mirrors in the girl's bathroom broke into giggles as Patty washed her hands. She worked hard to avoid eye contact with the cackling girls, but Tammy Schmidt, the leader of them all, stepped out in front of her, blocking her exit from the bathroom. She wrinkled her freckled nose at Patty and snorted like a pig.

“Did you get dressed in a pig sty today, Patty? Where’d you get those high-water bell-bottoms? They’re soooo cool!”

Their laughter exploded like glass shards around her.

She wasn’t the only one having problems. There were other kids who had it even worse. Kids whose clothes were terrible hand-me-downs from four brothers and sisters. Kids with whose chins and ears stuck out, fat kids, slow kids, nerdy kids, kids with thick, ugly glasses, kids who had peed themselves once in fourth grade and nobody ever, ever let them forget it.

Then there was a much bigger group in the middle, who were not quite popular, and not the lowest of the low, but avoided the jocks, the nerds, and the freaks, and kept in tight little protective groups of their own, struggling not to get teased or polluted by association with a lower group. At first, Patty thought there might be a chance of getting into this group but in her third week of school, she came down with flu and was out of school for two weeks. The flu made her throw up so much, she could only eat bananas and Jell-o for most of that time, and ended up losing about seven pounds. She was so skinny and pale when she got back, that most of the middle level kids were afraid to talk to her. By that time, the leaves were blowing from the trees, and kids were showing off their new fall denim jackets. They looked at Patty with blank eyes. Most seemed to have forgotten who she was. Did she really look that much different?

Patty wondered how she was ever going to catch up on the school work she’d missed. She was terrible at math, anyway, so she knew that was hopeless. As for history, science and social studies, even though she liked learning about different kinds of rocks and what they grew in Ecuador, just being in the classroom in the hard desks for hour

after hour was like torture. It was definitely harder than sixth grade, and none of the teachers here knew her. There was nobody to say, “oh, I had your brother David a couple of years ago,” or anything like that.

Patty was closing up her locker, getting ready to go home one afternoon, when she looked up and noticed a girl from her social studies class, Linda Nealon, standing nearby, holding an armful of books. Linda had plain brown hair and slightly buck teeth. She wore glasses. Linda was staring at her, not in an unfriendly way, but kind of like Patty was under examination.

“Do you believe in women’s liberation?” Linda finally asked.

Was this a prank of some sort? Linda was the girl who always had the right answers whenever the teacher called on her. She didn’t seem to be the pranking type.

“Um, I guess so. Yeah.”

“You sound uncertain. Perhaps it’s the way I phrased it. I suppose I should ask, do you believe girls are equal to boys?”

The issue was hardly Patty’s biggest concern at the moment, but there was something about the way Linda stood there, straight as a telephone pole, her scuffed blue Keds sneakers lined up so close together they touched at the arches, arms folded tightly around her bulging pile of books. Linda’s brown eyes looked into Patty’s without fear.

“Yes. Absolutely. I always thought that, in fact.”

“I had a feeling you would. I’ve been watching you, you know. I had a feeling you and I were like-minded in one way or another. I tend to be a bit unconventional.”

*You don't say?* Patty wanted to reply, but changed her mind. Right now she couldn't afford to be smart alecky to anyone who actually showed an interest in her as a human being. Besides, she liked the idea of being like-minded.

"I'm Patty Lofthaus."

"I know. I thought you might be interested in this book I just finished reading."

Linda handed her thinish blue paperback with cartoons of little girls in overalls and jeans building treehouses, playing baseball, getting dirty and generally acting like boys. The title was *Girls Are Equal, Too*.

"Cool," said Patty. "It kind of reminds me of that record, *Free To Be You and Me*."

"Yes, I'm familiar with it," said Linda with the tiniest air of *I'm beyond all that, now*. "Sorry about the illustrations, they're kind of juvenile. But the ideas are very interesting. It's all about how we're given the message from the time we're born that our life choices are limited. We can either be nurses, teachers, or mommies. But in reality, the whole world is opening up for women now, and there really is no limit to what we can do." She sounded so excited about all this, that Patty couldn't help but feel a little excited, too.

"Wow- I can't wait to read it."

Then Linda changed the subject. "I notice you're reading Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*," she said. "The *Fellowship of the Ring*, if I'm not mistaken?"

Patty jumped a little. How did she know? The book was nowhere in sight, stuffed into her backpack and zipped up. She was always very careful to make sure nobody at school ever saw it. It would be ultimate fuel for a jock attack. Tammy and her friends

would make mincemeat out of her if they caught her reading a book about elves and dwarves and wizards. She'd never hear the end of it.

"I've read them all four times, now. How many times have you read them?" asked Linda.

"Uh, this is my second time."

"Excellent! And have you read the Silmarillion, yet?"

This was too much. Any second now, they were both going to get beaten up. Patty could feel it. She looked up and down the hall for spying eyes, but the hallway was almost empty.

"My brother's reading the Silmarilion," Patty whispered, leaning forward. He says it's really hard."

"Oh, but it's worth the effort – it really is! The battles of the Elves of Gondolin and the forging of the Rings of Power..." Linda chatted on and followed Patty out the door. By the time Linda's bus appeared over the hill and she ran off to catch it, Patty had agreed to sit with her the next day at lunchtime. Linda has promised to show her how to write her name in the Elvish alphabet.

Linda and Patty sat together at lunch all that week. Linda helped Patty to figure out the homework in social studies class, basically saving her butt from being moved down to the slow class. They were soon joined by Heidi Nelson, who was perhaps the most picked-on kid in the entire seventh grade. Together, they formed the Geek Table, and it became Patty's home for the rest of the year.

Patty had some reservations about Heidi at first. She had long, greasy hair, her clothes were sad and shapeless, and she often wore the same thing two or three days in a

row. She kept her eyes on the floor as she walked down the halls, and never spoke to anyone, unless a teacher called on her, and that was rare. Her presence at the Geek Table definitely put both her and Linda at a disadvantage, but on the other hand, it was hard to say whether there might not be more strength in numbers. Besides, it kind of seemed to be destiny. Just by chance, their lockers were assigned next to each other's. They first spoke to each other about a week after Patty met Linda, as she and Heidi both happened to be hanging up their coats at the same time. Heidi's eyes temporarily lifted from the floor and fixed on the photos of the Beatles that Patty had taped inside her locker door. Heidi then did something she'd never done since entering middle school. She started a conversation.

“Are those from the White Album?”

Patty turned around, startled.

“Uh, yeah,” Patty answered. Heidi was silent for a moment, holding her backpack by the straps with both hands in front of her as if it might try to escape. Then she gestured for Patty to come over and look at the inside of her locker door. It was a jagged, wild collage of photos clipped from magazines. They were arranged in sections – the lower part devoted mainly to images of fantasy animals, dragons, gryphons, unicorns. The middle section was a tribute to Elton John and yes, the Beatles. The high, lofty reaches above Heidi's head were plastered with pictures of space ships streaking through the uncharted universe. Not one square inch of the door's inner surface was left uncovered.

The two girls talked about the Beatles, and Patty was amazed to find that Heidi had every one of the Beatles albums that she had, and even one she didn't. Liking the Beatles wasn't quite as bad as liking the Lord of the Rings, but Patty often had to put up

with comments like, “Uh, news flash: They broke up? I mean, like, duh!” when she opened her locker at the wrong time in the hallway traffic flow. Heidi didn’t seem to get the same remarks – maybe because the imagery on the inside of her locker door was so packed – some of the photos full-page size, others no bigger than a fingernail, some layered atop one another – that nobody could really see what was there to make fun of. A clever strategy, Patty thought. In fact, Heidi was a lot smarter than Patty had suspected.

So, by November, Patty’s whole Middle School reality was set. By virtue of sitting at the Geek Table at lunch every day with Linda and Heidi, she had ruined her chances of ever being popular.

No that there had ever been much chance of it anyway. Her parents didn’t have the money to send her to gymnastics class with Tammy Schmidt and Kristin Weber and the rest of the jocks, and her mother just laughed when she asked for any of the clothes they were wearing. Everything was too expensive, and did Patty have any idea what clothes cost? What it meant to provide for two kids on her own? She should be thankful to have a roof over her head, for God’s sake.

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In music class Mrs. Hinkle was holding tryouts for the fall performance, trying to sort the kids into sopranos, altos, and tenors. All the popular girls were now wearing white cargo pants with big plastic combs in the right back pocket. How did they all manage to dress exactly alike? Even their combs were the same, with big, oversize handles, so they could whip them out fast, like gunslingers. They flashed their combs

through their Farah Fawcett hairdos and shook it, spreading scented clouds of Clairol Herbal Essence through the room. They especially liked to do this in groups in front of the boys, while giggling and ignoring them. Patty found out the hard way that in the three weeks since she'd been out with the flu, bubble gum flavored lip gloss was no longer cool.

“Oh, God, don't tell me that's the same lip gloss you had in September. I can smell it from here. Hey, does anybody want to try Patty's bubble gum lip gloss and get contaminated?”

“And end up looking like *her*? No way.”

Patty wasn't sure if she was a soprano or an alto or what. She'd have to go up there in front of the whole music class when her name was called and stand next to Mrs. Hinkle's piano and sing the scales with all the other kids looking. Her heart pounded as she waited.

Mrs. Hinkle had thick glasses attached by a little string-pearl chain that went around her neck, so she could put them on and take them off again, depending on if she was squinting at a piece of sheet music or smiling at her assembled choir. She wore knit dresses with short sleeves that went to the knee and must have put her hair in rollers every morning because her hair was always perfectly set, even though it was that sort of nothing brown color that nobody noticed. Her arms were thick and strong, covered with big brown freckles. She pounded out the songs on the keyboard, and the class followed along in their music books. They learned work songs, like *Fifteen Miles on the Erie Canal*, and *Haul Sixteen Tons and What Do You Get?* Songs from musicals, like *Wildcat*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Hair*. They sang soldier songs, like *We are Marching to*

*Pretoria*, and *Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag and Smile, Smile, Smile*; Freedom songs like *Go Down, Moses*, and *We Shall Overcome*, and *Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho*. Patty didn't know who Moses or Joshua were, but the songs gave her shivers when she sang them. Somehow, Mrs. Hinkle got everybody to sound so amazing. Patty would even forget how much she hated the popular girls with their stupid combs in their pockets in the line in front of her. When they got to the final chorus of the song, it was like they were all in the same movie, everybody beautiful in Mrs. Hinkle's eyes, the way she beamed at them when they hit the high notes in the chorus part, lifting up her hand, palm upward, to get them to sing louder.

When it was Patty's turn, she set the music book down on the floor at her feet and stepped across the huge space between the rows of wooden chairs and Mrs. Hinkle's piano. The popular girls giggled.

"Now don't be shy, dear. This is easy. Just repeat after me. Ta, te, ti, to, tooooo," with each syllable, she struck a note on the piano, going up and down scales, each time with different syllables, la, le, li, lo, loo. At the end of each scale, Mrs. Hinkle smiled, showing all her dentures, and said, "Lovely!" and "That's just wonderful, darling!" And now they were going down, down, lower and lower, and Patty almost laughed when she had to sing, fa, fe, fi, fo, foo, in a low, growly voice, like the giant in Jack and the Beanstalk.

"Well! My, my, Patty – it looks like you're an alto!"

"Is that good or bad?"

Mrs. Hinkle threw her head back and laughed. Her huge bosom shook with it, like it was the funniest thing she ever heard.

“It’s a *great* thing, my dear! So far, all the altos are boys, but your voice will add something special to the section. You have a wonderful range and timbre, Miss Lofthaus. You may take a seat there.” And she pointed to the section of the room where no girls were – an empty seat next to the new foreign student whose name was Johann and whose voice was so quiet nobody even knew what language he spoke.

Patty slid between the rows of boys, all of them shifting in their seats and as she passed, some muttered and groaned, but Patty didn’t care, for once. She had *wonderful range and timbre*. Johann glanced at her for a second, then turned his pale blue eyes to the floor. His hair was almost white, bangs cut straight across, so limp it hung over his eyebrows no matter how many times he brushed it back with his fingers. He was shorter than Patty. His feet barely reached the floor, so he kept them braced on the low bar of the wooden chair. Even though it was cold outside, he was still wearing his blue shorts with the little white anchor embroidered on the hip pocket that he wore every day, even with sweaters. Patty figured he must have five identical pairs at home. Did he have any regular pants? What would he do when winter came? But Patty didn’t get a chance to ask him, because Mrs. Hinkle called his name next.

“Johann Van Hout?”

Johann popped up into the air like a rabbit who’d been shot. A few of the boys snickered.

“Pardon me,” the voice came like birdsong and Patty swung her knees to the side to let him pass. He was from England -- he had to be. The way the R in *pardon* just wasn’t there. “*Pahdon me.*” Patty had heard people from England on TV. Every Friday night she and David watched Monty Python, David making sure to wake her up in case

she fell asleep during Manix which came on right before and was totally boring. And to think, here was somebody from England, for real, and she would get to sit next to him in music class.

“That’s an interesting name, dear. Is it Dutch?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“So, then, are you from Holland?”

Johann clasped his hands behind his back and his face went from drained ivory to bright pink.

“No, Ma’am, South Africa.”

The class broke into gasps of disbelief and confusion.

“But Johann’s a *German* name!” Larry Shultz protested from the back row. A low chorus of *yeahs* from number of students, nodding, chiming in their agreements.

“South Africa!” Mrs. Hinkle said, “Why, isn’t that *fascinating!* I’m sure there’s so much the class can learn from you, Johann.”

“You ever seen a lion?” Eric Pitt said, leaning back in his chair, smiling with half his mouth, in a way that meant Johann was going to have trouble.

“Whoever heard of a *white* kid from Africa?” muttered Larry Schultz to the boy next to him. Mrs. Hinkle stood up and put her hands on her hips.

“That’s quite enough, class. You’ll have plenty of time to ask Johann questions at lunch time.”

That was the last time Patty got to sit next to Johann in music class, because, as it turned out, he was a tenor. He sang just as beautifully as he spoke, hitting each note, major and minor keys, sharps and flats, exactly as Mrs. Hinkle played them. His piping,

clear voice lilted from one key to another with no effort at all. It was like listening to a flute, or one of those musical birds you only hear out in the country. All the while he stood perfectly straight, hands at his sides, like a little nutcracker soldier. Mrs. Hinkle applauded and bounced up and down on the piano bench when he'd finished.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I believe we have found our boy soloist!” she announced. Then she made him go sit with the girls and the three other boys whose voices hadn't changed yet. Johann looked like his face would never go back to its normal color again.

Johann was in Patty's social studies class, where he sat two rows in front of her near the window, and she got to look at the back of his head for a whole hour and fifteen minutes each day. But at lunch time, Johann usually sat by himself, eating a bag lunch he'd brought from home as Patty went to sit at the nerd table.

From listening to the other kids interrogating Johann at lunchtime, Patty learned that he was actually a year younger than all of them, because apparently the grades didn't go the same way in the African schools. So that explained how short he was, and the high voice. And yes, he *had* seen lions, and elephants and zebras and giraffes, too. He came from a town Patty couldn't pronounce, with a lot of M's and P's in it. His father was a visiting professor at the University. Nobody understood exactly what he was talking about when he answered the question of what a white kid was doing in Africa, and how he got the Dutch name. They just kind of gave up on it.

“They certainly are giving him the third degree,” Linda observed. She was slouched over her lunch tray, picking the cubes of carrot out of her compartment of peas.

“They have nothing better to do. Anyone different is fair game to them,” Heidi said, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

Patty kept in the conversation, but half of her was listening to the kids questioning Johann behind her the whole time. When she finished eating, she took her tray over to the trash, passing Johann and the group of kids around him.

“So, you have leopards there?” one boy was asking.

“Yes.”

“And tigers? You got tigers?”

“Tigers are *not* African,” Patty said. She couldn’t help herself. People could be so stupid. “They live in India, China, even in Russia, but *not* Africa! Dummies.” She tossed the tray on the rack and walked back to the nerd table.

“Don’t listen to her, she’s an idiot,” said Andy Hagan.

“No, actually, she’s right. There *are* no tigers in Africa. It’s an Asian animal,” said Johann, packing up his knapsack. He politely excused himself to return to class.

Passing the nerd table on his way out the door, he looked at Patty, and for the first time, she saw him smile. He had a gap between his two front teeth.

“Did you see that?” said Linda, who had stopped rummaging among the books in her bag long enough to notice. “He smiled at you, Patty!”

Patty watched him disappear out the lunchroom door, focusing on the back of his skinny legs, those stupid blue shorts. She didn’t know what to say.

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On Wednesday nights, Dad picked her up to take her to horseback riding lessons. Patty had begged to take riding lessons for months, but it wasn’t until the divorce that her

parents finally said yes. And now once a week, Dad picked her up in his blue Chevy for the long ride to Windwood Stables. It was almost a half hour's drive. Patty would look out the window as the neighborhood, and finally the whole town fell away from them, the city turning to suburbs and then cornfields on either side of them. Dad would start by asking her about school, but soon they'd be talking about other things. Patty would mention that they were doing amphibians in science class and Dad would start telling a story about the frog he had dissected in high school, or tell her that in France they eat frog's legs, and in Russia they eat frog's *eggs*, and Patty would ask where in the world they eat frog's eyeballs, and Dad would say only as a special delicacy for a the high muckety-muck of outer turdland, and Patty would be laughing so hard, she'd forget how nervous she was.

What made her nervous was Kyle, the man that taught the lessons. When she first started, Patty couldn't get the horse to do anything. Not even walk in a stupid circle around the ring with the rest of the horses. And he wasn't even a horse – just a pony. The pony that every kid at Windwood stables started riding on their first lesson, a chestnut with a black mane named Tinker.

“Let up on the rein, y' idiots! That ain't the way – see how he's fightin' you? Can't you *see*?” Kyle was built like a jockey, only too tall to be one. With his skinny, bowed legs and his boots and jeans caked with dust, he looked like he could have no possible life outside the stables. Patty imagined that if he were to be magically transported to, say, a high-class business office or a formal cocktail party, he would just explode like one of those bizarre fishes that can only live so far down in the ocean, the pressure would crush a person's eyeballs. His hair was shaved close to his head, white

stubble flecked with jet black. His eyes were steely gray and his voice lashed like a bullwhip across the riding arena. He never bothered to learn anyone's name – he called them all by name of whatever horse they were riding that night.

“Buck! What in hell is wrong with you? Don't be afraid to get that gelding's knees up – he ain't your dying grandmother. And Sadie-Mae ain't never gonna get round that pole if you sit there like a sack of pigshit all slumped in the saddle. That's right, *you* ride the horse – the horse don't ride you! And Tinker! Little lady, you can flap your goddamn legs as much as want, but it ain't worth a wet fart in a coal mine if you don't lean forward! Come on, for Christ sake! Show that pony who's boss! He's little, but he ain't stupid!”

When somebody's horse acted up, Kyle would charge out in the middle of the ring, yelling, “*Ho! Ho!*” He'd grab the reins and tell the rider to get the hell off. Then Kyle would get on. As soon as his boots were in the stirrups, the horse's entire personality changed. The horse that had been bucking, snorting and rearing would walk in docile circles, trot obediently, stop and start on command. Then Kyle would dismount and toss the reins to the humiliated student and say to the horse,

“Now stop your bullshit, or I'll knock your brains out, lazy bastard.”

The smell of the ring was the smell of fear. Horse sweat, manure, Kyle's eyes on you, fear of the ground flying by in a blur under the pounding hoofs, fear of what it would mean to meet it headfirst if you made a wrong move. It took three or four lessons, but finally, Patty learned how to get Tinker to walk, jog-trot and lope around the ring. The loping was the best: not quite a gallop, but better in a way: a smooth, long-striding canter that moved the horse like a wind around the long arena, the dust flying up in

clouds to the arched ceiling beams. When they were all doing it right, she felt high, better than gas in the dentist's chair. Like sitting at the very top of the Ferris wheel and realizing you're not scared at all – you can sit rocking in the seat, take in the stars above and the tiny lights of the midway a zillion feet below and, for once, for this one moment, it's all yours. And Kyle would fall silent and slowly walk to the middle of the ring, following them all with his eyes. Then he'd grin and pull a pack of cigarettes out of his the pocket of his denim jacket and light up, wipe an arm across his forehead.

“Marlboro Country,” he'd declare. His rasping laughter rose up and bounced off the tin roof. Patty knew it was right, then, when Tinker's inside front leg whipped out to meet the ground first, carrying the other three legs smoothly behind, the rhythm like a boat on a rippled lake, the smell of horse, leather and dust in her nostrils, and Kyle saying *Marlboro Country* in the middle of the ring.

At the far end of the arena was a wide window where people could sit and watch the lessons. A TV was on in there, and Dad was in there, with the other people waiting. Parents, husbands. She hoped Dad was watching now.

“I don't wear a watch,” Kyle said as they made their fifth loping trip around the ring. “Never did need one.” Patty thought about this. When she grew up she wanted the kind of life where she didn't need to wear a watch.

“When I see Johnny Carson come on the TV in there, I know it's time to quit,” said Kyle.

Then there was the ride back, when the dark closed in around the car windows and she could see the stars through the back windshield, and everybody else in the world disappeared but her and Dad. That was when they had conversations that she couldn't

have with anyone else. He would tell her secrets that she liked to believe he never told anyone else. Like once, when he was a little boy, he believed everyone in his life – his family, his teachers, his friends were all actors pretending to be who they were, and the only one who didn't know the plot of the play was him. But of course, he was the star. He was really in reality a prince, and not a stuttering kid with thick glasses whose father worked in a battery factory. Someday, they would tell him all of this – maybe on his birthday. They would all be assembled in a room and tell him what beautiful country he would be the king of. And then he would go there and take his throne. Patty laughed.

“Wow – I wonder if anyone else ever grew up thinking that?”

“Lots of kids, believe me. I wanted to write a children's book about it until an editor told me it was a cliché.”

“A what?”

“I mean, that it was too common. He said that was practically every boy's childhood fantasy.”

Patty tried to remember if she had ever had that fantasy. It must be a boy thing, she decided.

“Here's something to think about,” Dad said, “There is no such thing as an original thought. Anything you can think of, somebody else has thought of it before, or is thinking right now.”

Patty thought for a second.

“Green-faced pygmies with ring around the collar!” she said. “There, I bet nobody's ever thought of that.”

“You know, you may be on to something. What do they do?”

“They play accordions.”

“Excellent. Write that one up. You may have a chance.”

He was staring at the oncoming highway lines in a certain way that said he was thinking about something else. A silence settled in on them, and whenever that happened Patty would feel the end of the road rushing up to meet them, and her throat would grow tight. She wanted to fill every minute with talk, to get as much as she could out of the time they had together. For moments like this, she got the idea to keep a list of topics to discuss with him, so they wouldn't run out of things to talk about. She kept the list in her jeans pocket, adding new things as she thought of them. She would pull it out, damp and crumpled from two hours of hard riding, try to do it casually, so he wouldn't notice. She'd have to wait for a passing highway lights to illuminate the little scrap of paper so she could read her notes.

1. If the universe was created in a big bang, what was there before?
2. If we're so superior to animals, How come a baby giraffe can walk three hours after it's born, and it takes human babies a year?
3. What if Chairman Mao made every single person in China jump up and down at the same time? Would it cause an earthquake?

Somehow, though, as much as she tried to make the questions as deep and important as possible, these discussions never went quite as far as the ones that would happen without thinking. Eventually she learned to rely on them only as a last resort, whenever a silence seemed a bit too long.

The white lines on the black road slipped by, sucked like noodles under the car.

“So, if there’s no such thing as an original thought,” she said, “if everything we think about somebody has already thought about before, then how does anybody ever say anything new?”

“Well,” said Dad, “It’s all about how you say it. You see, that’s the real trick. Say, when you listen to the radio, what are most of the songs about?”

“Love.”

“Right. And how many times can you sing about the same thing? You’re happy because you’re in love, you’re sad because your girl left you for another fella, you sing about having nobody because everybody else has somebody – I mean, there are only so many subjects, right?”

“I guess.”

“But take that song you were listening to when I picked you up after school today, *Please Mr. Postman* – the Beatles didn’t write that, by the way.”

“They didn’t?”

“Honey, I was listening to that song in college – that was an old Motown hit by The Marvelettes. It was before you were born. Anyway, that’s just a song about missing your boyfriend. They could have just sung about the guy. Oh, I miss you, why don’t you write, blah, blah, blah... But singing the song to the *mailman* instead of to the guy you’re missing, now *that’s* new. A new way to say something old. That’s what made it a hit. Get it?”

Patty thought about it. “Yeah, I get it.”

“You dig?” He punched her softly on the shoulder.

Patty laughed, “I dig.”

She wanted to ask him if he was in love with Lorraine. If what Mom said was true, that she might be their new stepmother. It was such a horrible word, stepmother. But Lorraine wasn't horrible. There was nothing horrible about her, except all that stuff Sarah was talking about, about them making out and sleeping together in the room next door. And what Gloria said, about them starting it all a year ago, before the divorce. Did grownups really keep falling in love even after they got old? She was losing the feeling now, the perfect her-and-Dad-in-the-dark feeling. She made herself stop thinking about Lorraine. She was learning how to do that, how to snap a thought shut, stick it into a little plastic box inside her brain.

They were coming into the outskirts of town now. The Shell gas station and the Piggly Wiggly whizzed by. Soon they'd pass the big Kohl's grocery store and it would only be minutes left.

When she was little, she used to sleep in the front seat during road trips. Her feet on Mom's lap and her head on Dad's lap. It was hard to believe she had ever been that small. She remembered the feeling of Dad's breath moving his stomach in and out, behind her head. Resting in the perfect space between the steering wheel and his stomach, the best pillow ever. He turned off the Allen Street exit.

“So,” said Patty, “let's say Chairman Mao made everybody in China jump up and down at the same time, would it cause an earthquake?”

“What?”

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So there was Wednesday night, and there was Saturday, and then there were all the days in between, when she didn't see Dad. And even Saturday wasn't the same as Wednesday, because she had to share him with three other kids and Lorraine. And as much as Gloria asked questions about him and his new life, Dad never asked her about Gloria. Or about their lives at home at all. Patty was glad, in a way. It made things easier. Otherwise, she would feel like a kind of double agent, spying for both sides. This way she would never have to repeat the awful things Mom said about Lorraine. She wouldn't have to talk about how Mom couldn't find a job, how she seemed to be drinking earlier and earlier in the day, how she cried sometimes at night in her bedroom. Dad would never ask her to talk about any of that. They were free to talk about frogs, pygmies, Chairman Mao and the Big Bang.

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Patty's alarm clock read 12:30 pm and she still wasn't asleep. Mom was supposed to have been home sometime around ten and still wasn't back. That meant she was still at the party. Drinking and drinking and drinking and drinking God knows how many drinks. Usually some guy drove her home, and he was almost as drunk as she was. Maybe they were dead already on the highway, their bodies so smashed up the police couldn't even identify them. Maybe she met a guy and decided to run away with him and Patty and David would get a phone call next week from Milwaukee or Chicago or France. France? No, not France. What a stupid thought. Nothing made sense at this hour.

Patty flopped over in the bed for the hundredth time. Why did she have to do this? Everybody watched the same public service announcements on TV. Everybody knew about the Dangers of Drunk Driving. Gloria and her friends had to be the supreme idiots of the universe to go out and do it anyway. Patty could hear her heart beating inside her ribs. She hated the sound of her heartbeat. She was always listening for a mistake, a blip in the pattern, the arrhythmia that spelled early death. If it was going to happen, she didn't want to hear it. She didn't want to know about it. Her heart was always louder when she lay on her left side. She flipped back over to her right. That was when she saw it.

There was someone in the doorway.

A shadow blocking out the dim light of the hall, the shape of a body, the silhouette of a head. Was it Mom, home already? Maybe Patty had actually fallen asleep and didn't know it, and now Mom was...

No, that was stupid. Another stupid thought. Patty could feel the shadow looking down at her. It was definitely, definitely not Mom. She tried to move but it was like her head was glued to the pillow. If she pretended to be asleep, maybe it would go away -- *she* would go away. She could almost hear breathing, only it wasn't breath, it was more like a pulse, pumping through the air. Something else that said *alive, alive*. Her heart hammered louder than ever in her ribs. Patty began counting to one hundred, something to concentrate her mind so she didn't panic. She had gotten up to seventy one when beams of light suddenly shot across her bedroom wall and a car engine growled up the drive.

The Ghost Lady was gone.

The car doors slammed, the door opening and closing, Jinx whining and yelping downstairs. and Gloria mumbling to him as she made her way up the stairs.

Patty pulled the covers up over her head and didn't know how she was supposed to feel. Wanting to be a million miles away. Was that a feeling? Did it have a name? If it didn't, she would have to give it one.

## Chapter Four

“Faggot.”

“Fatass.”

“Faggot.”

“Fatass.”

“Faggot.”

David's three-speed bike was upside down, David crouching next to it, under the Japanese maple as he tried to get the chain back on. Down on the sidewalk was Monty Rittenhaus, a huge kid in David's ninth grade class who unfortunately lived in the neighborhood. He had followed David home from school and found out where the Lofthouses lived. It was no longer enough for Monty to torment David in the hallways, so he had to stalk him at home in his free time. David pretended not to care, something he

was very good at. Patty watched from a safe distance, leaning against the side of the house in the little alley between the front yard and the back yard.

“Why dontcha get a haircut, pussy?” Monty’s eyes squinted, piglike. He had moist, pink cheeks. His clothes were probably from last year. He seemed to be stuffed into them, like sausage in a casing.

“Don’t you have some place to go, Monty? Like some kinda all-you-can eat buffet?” David inquired.

“Only a faggot thinks of a word like *buffet*.”

Monty had him there. It was either David’s hair spilling in a blond wave over his collar almost to his shoulders, or it was his vocabulary that got him into trouble.

Things had been better on the East Side. The way David and Patty dressed hadn’t been a problem. The way they talked had been okay. But somehow out here it was different. The kids could tell something was weird about them. After just exchanging a few words, you could see their eyes go into a squint, noses twitching like they’d caught new, suspicious scent. Patty wished she knew *what* was different, what crime they were suspected of. The only thing she knew for sure was that they didn’t belong. The kids in the neighborhood let them hang out in the park across the street, but didn’t join them. The boys would play basketball and touch football and David would watch from the sidelines, never for very long. Patty knew he was waiting to be asked to play, but that he would never in a million years invite himself into their game. She also knew the longer he waited, the worse it would be for him. She was glad she wasn’t a boy, that nobody expected her to play sports after school.

Monty's perma-press Wrangler jeans hung an inch too short at the ankle, his shirt was two sizes too small, and he had sweat rings under his doughy arms. One of his sneakers was untied. There were a half-dozen things to insult him about, but David only concentrated on his bike, turning the pedal and examining the action of the derailleur, flipping the chain from one gear to the other.

"Your bike sucks, faggot. You got a *faggot* bike."

"Maybe I should shove it up your fat ass. But that would pollute it."

Monty had been waiting for this. He moved on David with frightening speed. With one huge, sunburned arm, he threw David against the trunk of the Japanese maple. Flakes of bark fell into David's hair and he stumbled to his knees. Before he could find his feet again, Monty had the bike hoisted high in the air and sent it crashing down on top of him. David tried to protect his face with his arms. The spokes of the back wheel snapped around his elbows and tore bleeding gouges. Patty ran into the yard and grabbed a baseball bat from the grass and came running.

"Get away from my brother, you son of a bitch! Big, fat asshole!"

Patty swung the bat as hard as she could in front of her, whizzing inches from Monty's face. It took Monty a few seconds to figure out what was going on: just enough time for David to get to his feet and take the bat from Patty. His arms trickling streams of blood, he swung it at Monty, aiming low, so it clipped his left shin. Monty howled in pain. David, completely abandoned now to rage, swung again, aiming this time for Monty's head. Still tangled in the mess of the bike around his feet, he lurched forward, losing his balance and missed by about six inches. Monty limped away, tears streaming, cursing, swearing revenge. Gloria's voice boomed down from the front door.

“What the hell are you doing hitting that boy with a baseball bat?”

“He tried to *kill* me!”

“*Kill* you? Get your asses in here! Both of you!”

The living room was big and echoey since Dad had come back for the huge roll-top desk and marble-surfaced end tables he inherited from his grandfather. Dust balls still sat in the corner where the desk had been. With half the furniture gone, you could now see more places where Dad had run out of paint, leaving chunks of the baseboard the dirty pink it had been when they moved in eight months ago. Patty felt sick and dizzy, suddenly. The bare floorboards blurred in front of her eyes and she swayed a little on her feet, her arms still tingling from the strange feeling of holding the bat. How close she had been to really hurting somebody for the first time.

“That fat kid *was* trying to kill him, mom. You should have seen it--”

“Enough! I’ve had enough from both of you. For the love of God--” Gloria collapsed on the one remaining chair in the room and removed her glasses so she could put her face in her hands. “Please, I just can’t take it. Look at this place – will you look?” She waved her arm around the room, tears trickling from her eyes. “Your father is gone. Do you realize what that *means*?”

Patty and David looked at each other. There was a right and a wrong answer here. There had to be. They said nothing.

“It means I don’t know how I’m going to pay the bills. I don’t know how I’m going to replace the furniture. And you kids are out there *fighting* – I’m saying for the love of God, we have to be a *family*. Do you understand what that means?”

Patty looked at David. David looked at the floor. Gloria lit a cigarette.

“David, are you bleeding? Come here.” Gloria examined his elbows, went to the bathroom and came back with a wet washcloth and a box of Band-aids.

“I mean it, both of you. You have to find a way to get along with the kids in this neighborhood. If that boy’s mother calls me, that’s just one more thing I have to deal with, and I’m serious when I tell you, I can’t take much more.”

“Sorry, Mom,” said David, wincing as she dabbed the gouges in his arm.

“Mom, that kid picked up the bicycle and threw it on David’s *head*. It’s lucky David didn’t get his whole head smashed open.”

“He what?” Gloria was taping on band-aids now. She looked at David. David nodded.

“Why, that little piece of shit. What’s his last name?”

“Rittenhaus.”

“Fine - you know what? Let his mother call. I’ll give that bitch a piece of *my* mind.”

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The next week, Patty actually wasn’t sure whether school was better because she could get away from home or home was better because she could get away from school. It was a confusing feeling. While Mrs. Sanders blabbed on in Social Studies class about the export products of Peru and how bananas are harvested (by *hand!* Just imagine!), Patty counted how many times Johann blinked in one minute (thirty-two). His seat was two rows ahead and over by the window, where a beam of sunlight would catch his

blonde eyelashes and send little flashes across the room that only she could see. He didn't seem to know she was looking at him. He always paid attention in class, always knew the right answer. The teacher loved to call on him. How could you not love hearing the flute-song of that voice?

The teacher described the traditional clothing of the Andean people while Patty wrote the lyrics to Norwegian Wood backwards in her notebook. Linda had taught her how to write backwards, it was easy once you got the hang of it. You just had to sort of tilt your brain in the other direction and not get distracted. The best part was holding it up to the mirror to check for any mistakes. She sometimes got the Bs and Ds mixed up. But she did that writing forwards, too. She laughed when Linda told her that people talked about Leonardo DaVinci's backwards writing as a proof of his genius. "So, does this mean we're geniuses?" Patty had asked her, after writing out the preamble of Star Trek on the inside of her notebook: "...reitnorf lanif eht ,ecapS" Linda laughed, "It's funny, isn't it? The things that impress people!"

In a lot of ways, school here was just the same as her old school. Teachers here called out her name in a way she was already used to.

"Miss Lofthaus? Are you with us? Hello?" And Patty would look up from her doodling, called back to reality from a million miles away, from the places in her own mind that were so much more interesting than the classroom. Back when she was in elementary school, the teachers didn't know what her problem was, but they knew she had one. She was constantly being handed notes to report to the office, where she would meet with some smiling young counselor with her long hair clipped back with a leather barrette. The counselor would ask her funny questions that didn't seem connected. Do

you have trouble sleeping at night? Do you ever feel sad? Do you get regular checkups at the doctor? Is your mother in the house when you come home from school? Has any boy here tried to touch you? Patty would always wonder what she had done wrong, why she was being singled out. They were always testing her hearing. Most kids only had to do it once, in the first grade, but she got hers tested about every six months. She would listen to the beep tones coming through the giant, padded earphones, and raise her hand every time she heard the tone, starting with the low, low boooooooooooooop, and going up, up up until it got to the tiny little fairly dog-whistle peeeeeeeeeee, and Patty would raise her hand and the counselor wearing the other pair of earphones would lift her eyebrows in surprise. They would always say the same thing – your hearing is better than normal, much better. Exceptional, even.

Still teachers would yell “wake up!” at her when she wasn’t even sleepy; just watching a cardinal in the tree outside the window. “Patty, can you tell us what the astronauts found on the moon?” the teacher would ask, in a voice that wasn’t expecting much. It was like they had already given up on her, but were just doing it out of principle. Patty wasn’t even interested enough to fight it. “Nope,” she’d reply. The other kids would snicker in their seats. She was comic relief on a dull afternoon, the smell of chalk dust and crayons, the lowering beams of sunlight pouring through the windows, making everyone sleepy at their desks.

Then it was back to the school counselor to answer questions like, “what is it you feel like you do *well*, Patty?” Leather Barrette’s eyes going big and wide on *well*, as if this would be a new word for Patty, one she’d never encountered before.

Mrs. Birch, her third grade teacher told her she'd never move up to the fourth if she didn't memorize the multiplication tables. The twos were easy. There was a rhythm there. Same with the fives. You could almost tap dance to it: five-ten-fifteen-twenty-twenty five-thirty-thirty five forty. You felt like you were getting somewhere, on a freight train, maybe. But after that, it was just stupid. Nine times seven? Are you kidding? Patty would draw snails and centipedes in the margins of her homework, beetles with giant mandibles, all carrying a number to the edge of a cliff and dropping it off. Again and again, she'd end up in the principal's office, be handed another cardboard square multiplication table and told she'd better memorize it or else. She imagined herself twenty-four years old, squeezed into a third-grader's desk, being asked what is nine times seven and shrugging her shoulders.

But by the end of third grade, they were all doing New Math, anyway. None of the teachers knew how to teach New Math, so they had special students from the University come in to teach it, and soon the classrooms were filled with more leather barrettes than Patty could count. Each classroom had two or three student teachers assigned to it, all in jeans and turtlenecks, smiling and excited, demonstrating sets, groups, and story problems. Patty was grateful to get lost in all the commotion. Mrs. Birch suddenly had new enemies. She complained that the student teachers were turning her classroom into a circus with their construction paper mobius strips hanging from the ceiling and ping-pong ball experiments rolling all over the floor. She hardly yelled at Patty at all anymore.

One of the student teachers even used Patty in an experiment where she had to go to take a bus to the University two afternoons a week and explain to a younger kid what a

trapezoid was. “See? It’s like a triangle with its point cut off. It’s like a rectangle, but the two sides are about to run into each other,” Patty would explain over and over again to some first grader who was also wondering what he’d done wrong. The University people gave Patty all kinds of cool equipment – plastic stencils, rulers, paper and colored pencils, just like a real professor. Soon, she became the world’s number one expert in trapezoids. There was no question about trapezoids she couldn’t answer. The whole time, the student teachers were watching her from the next room behind a mirror that was really a window, and there was a microphone tape-recording the whole thing. Every kid left the room, her very own classroom at the University, knowing what a trapezoid was.

After two weeks, the experiment was over. She was never asked a question about a trapezoid in any math class, or ever again in her life, and that was the last time she really felt like she knew anything about math.

There was one difference, actually, between her old school and this one. In this school, there was actually something in the classroom to pay attention to. Johann was in both her English and Social Studies class. She could look as much as she wanted at the back of his head, at his bare, skinny knees, at the way he jiggled his right foot up and down, without him even knowing she was even doing it.

The clock finally crawled around to three-fifteen and Social Studies class ended. Patty was putting her books back in her bag when she noticed a folded up slip of paper fall on her desk. *Lofthaus is a dogface*, it probably said. Or something equally original. She looked around the room. Everybody was already out door except for Mrs. Sanders, who was busy putting all her books and papers away, and mumbling to herself. Patty’s fingers tingled as she unfolded the paper.

*Patty,*

*Please meet me outside by the aspen trees after class.*

*--Johann*

Patty's heart jumped.

Aspen, aspen -- what the hell kind of tree is an aspen?

Patty ran to the window and searched the school yard. It was enormous. There had to be at least fifty trees scattered across it, from the softball field to the basketball courts to the monkey bars. Which ones were the aspens? Why hadn't she paid attention in Earth Sciences class? She turned around but Mrs. Sanders had already erased the board and gone. Patty ran across the hallway to where she knew Linda would be leaving English class and heading to her locker. She intercepted her in the hallway.

“Quick, Linda! What does an aspen tree look like?”

Linda pushed her glasses up on her nose. She wrapped her arms around her books and looked at the ceiling a moment.

“Aspen. A relative of the birch tree, although the bark is gray and rough, rather than shiny and smooth. It's sometimes called a quaking aspen, because of the tendency for the leaves to twist in different directions in the wind.” Linda flapped her left hand back and forth to demonstrate. “And because the leaves are glossy, they reflect the sunlight in a way that makes the tree seem to shimmer. It's actually the shape of the leaf stem that causes the leaves to--”

“Do we have any in the school yard? I need to know quick, Linda!”

“Well, yes, don’t you know those two big ones behind the monkey bars?”

“Oh. Where we sit and play Truth or Dare?”

“Exactly. Why is it so urgent?”

“Never mind! Thanks!” Patty fled down the hallway.

“I’ll be expecting a full explanation of this tomorrow!” Linda called after her, a little annoyed.

Patty slowed her run down to a walk as soon as she spotted Johann. He was leaning against one of the trees, his back to her, looking out through the fence at the kids boarding the buses for home. They were all calling to each other, yelling out the bus windows, laughing, throwing balls, pushing each other down. Nobody spoke to Johann. He could have been looking at them from a thousand miles away. From Africa itself. He looked littler than ever against the great mass of the tree trunk. His naked knees looked cold under his shorts. Patty hoped his mom and dad would buy him some normal pants soon. He turned around when he heard her footsteps. She saw his throat swallow as she approached. She wasn’t sure what to do. She leaned against the other tree, waiting for him to say something. He swallowed again, taking one more quick look at the kids through the fence. Then he came around to Patty’s tree and sat down in the grass on the other side of it, putting it between them and the fence. Patty understood. The tree was big enough to hide both of them from view. She sat next to him.

“I’m glad you’ve come,” he said in his tiniest voice. He looked at the ground and began pulling up blades of grass. Not “*I’m glad you came,*” not “*You made it, cool,*” but “*I’m glad you’ve come.*” Nobody talked like that. Nobody but Johann.

“Yeah, well... Yeah.”

What was she doing here? What did he want? She realized in sudden panic that she'd just gotten up and bolted after him, not even thinking what this might be about. Maybe it was a plot. Maybe he had gotten in with the popular boys and a bunch of them were in the bushes right now with water balloons, snickering and getting ready to--

"I just... What I mean is, I wanted to ask you if..." He was still looking at the ground, now pulling the grass harder, the roots coming up with it. "... if you'd like to walk home with me this afternoon. You see, I've been walking alone every day, and, well... You seem alright."

Patty's heart pounded with each pinch of grass Johann ripped up out of the ground. It felt like that's what his words were doing to her, pulling up her guts by the roots, one by one. How was he doing it? What was it about him?

"You *walk* to school? I...uh... I usually take the bus, I mean. Actually, that's my bus leaving right now." Patty pointed to the Forest Hills local that was pulling away from the curb in a cloud of blue exhaust.

Johann's eyes flew open with alarm. "Oh, shit!" he said, looking away at the disappearing bus. He jumped up as if he could leap over the fence and stop it, then stood there, watching it disappear. He tossed a handful of grass to the ground and said something else, another word in a language Patty had never heard before. She could tell it was a swear word. She put her hand over her mouth to keep back the laugh, but she couldn't help it. Hearing those dirty words coming out of that perfect little voice – it was hilarious.

"Why are you laughing? I've made you miss your bus!"

“Because you’re so funny. I’m glad you made me miss it. It’s worth it just to hear you say *shit*.”

Bright patches of pink bloomed on Johann’s cheeks. “Sorry about that. I’ll wait with you for the next one, if you like.”

“No, I’ll walk with you. As long as you’re on my way home.”

He was, but the walk to her house was almost four miles, and she wasn’t quite sure of the way. She didn’t tell him this. It was important that this all appear as normal as possible. After a few blocks, she got up enough nerve to ask what she had been wondering.

“So, what makes you say I’m alright?”

Johann thought for a moment.

“Well, I suppose it was that day we were in the cafeteria, you know. And all the kids were pounding me with questions, do you remember? And so many of the questions were complete rubbish – like, do we have elephants walking down the streets? Do we even *have* streets? Is there electricity? Do all the women really walk around with their boobies hanging out?”

“Oh, really? I missed the boobies part.”

“They’re *idiots*. Anyway, then you came along and said what you did about how there are no tigers in Africa, and I thought, well, at least *she* sounds sensible, and then I looked at you and--”

Johann suddenly stopped talking. He walked a little faster, staring at his blue sneakers. The pink patches had popped up onto his cheeks again. Patty thought of something to say quick.

“Do you watch TV when you go home? What do you usually watch?” She asked.

“I like Speed Racer and The Munsters best,” said Johann, relaxing again.

“Television here is great – we don’t get any shows like that in South Africa.”

“Yeah, my brother likes Speed Racer. The animation is pretty crappy, though, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know – I suppose. I still like it. I like any kind of cartoons. Back in South Africa, it seems the only American program we get is the Brady Bunch.”

“Oh, man, that sucks.” It was very important not to say anything stupid. She made mental notes: *Okay, so they do have TV in Africa. But it only plays the Brady Bunch – got it.* She was dying to hear about everything in his country. Maybe he would tell her without her having to ask stupid questions and look like an idiot.

“Yeah, otherwise it’s boring old news and football and cricket and the president’s speeches and stuff. It’s horrible.”

“It sounds like it.”

“England has pretty good TV. But not in the afternoon. Not like here.”

“You lived there, too?”

“My dad is always getting transferred. Germany, Australia, England, and now here. Every time he says it might be permanent, and every time it’s not.” Johann kept looking at the sidewalk as he walked, stepping over the cracks, sometimes jumping to avoid them, his hands plunged deep into his pockets. Patty wondered what it would be like, moving from country to country like that.

“But it must be kind of cool, right? Seeing all those places, I mean. I never been out of the country at all. Not even to Canada.”

“I’ve been there. It’s nothing special, really. Of all the places, I guess I like Germany best, because they’ve got castles. And the *best* candy. But my dad’s job there ended, and I lost all my friends. Again.”

Patty wondered how to ask the next question. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer.

“Do you know how long you’ll be here?”

Johann stopped and picked up a long stick. He dragged it along the ground as they walked. “I’ve no idea. Maybe four months, maybe six months, maybe forever.” On *forever*, he broke the stick into four pieces and flung them into the bushes. They were walking by the creek now. The trickle of water deep in the ravine below winked up at them between branches of oak and elm. It would get steadily wider as they walked east. Occasionally, Johann jumped up to touch the leaves of the scrubby, wild trees along the creek that shaded them overhead.

“Are we getting close to your house, yet?”

“It’s coming up just now.”

Patty looked for the house but it was another block before they reached it. It was white and green, with a flat roof low to the ground. In the front yard, a thin woman with tied-back dark blonde hair was watering some rose bushes.

“Hello, mum.”

“Hello darling. And who have we here?” She wiped her hands on the canvas apron she was wearing. As she smiled, little crinkles spread around her eyes and cheeks. Her skin was tanned and freckled, her hair wispy around her face.

“This’s Patty. I made her miss her bus.”

“*Did* you? Oh, dear.”

“But I don’t mind. It’s okay,” said Patty quickly.

“Why don’t you both come in and have your tea? I’ll be happy to give you a ride home afterwards, dear.”

They sat at the table in a perfectly spotless kitchen, and Johann’s mother set out a pot of tea with lots of milk and sugar, a plate Lorna Doone cookies and little wedges of buttered toast and a jar raspberry jam, so they could slather on as much as they wanted. It was excellent. The whole time, Johann’s mother talked with him about what he’d learned in school that day. Johann slumped in his chair and said it was all stuff he knew already. His mother talked like him, but *not* like him. As they spoke, his accent changed to sound more like hers. Patty decided it wasn’t really British at all, the way they talked. Some of it she couldn’t even understand. She’d never seen Johann this way before. He was always so stiff and straight and nervous at school. Here he had both shoes off before he’d even sat down, was kicking the table leg and talking with his mouth full. There was so much to look at. The part of the living room wall she could see through the kitchen door had wooden masks on it that looked like they belonged to witch doctors. There was a calendar on the wall with a Chinese water color design and its own pen tied to a string and something written in almost every day. A glass prism on the kitchen window sill flashed tiny rainbows on the walls. The house was so clean and perfect, Patty was afraid to touch anything. She usually felt that way in other people’s houses. She wondered how they stayed so clean. Was everybody else incredibly neat, or was her family incredibly sloppy?

“So, where do *you* live, Patty?” Johann’s mother asked.

“Hillshire Place. It’s on the corner of Commonwealth, next to Rugby Row.”

Johann’s mother laughed. “You’d think it was London, wouldn’t you? Don’t those names sound like London, darling?”

“I suppose. Nothing around here *looks* like London,” said Johann, stirring his tea.

She asked Patty about her family, if she had brothers or sisters – the usual questions. When Patty said they just lived with her mom, and her dad lived in an apartment downtown, Johann’s mother stopped asking questions. She gave a nervous little smile and excused herself. Patty wondered if she had said something wrong. It was so hard to tell with grownups.

She leaned towards Johann and whispered, “So you do this every day? Come home and eat like this? And your mom makes it for you?”

“You mean tea? Yeah. When I get home.”

“And you get dinner, too?”

“Of course.”

“Lucky.”

Johann explained how tea was like a whole other meal, every day at four o’clock or so, which was perfect timing, as far as Patty was concerned, because that was exactly one of the times of the day when she got hungry.

“I can’t believe how stupid America is for not having this. I’m gonna tell my mom we’re missing a whole meal. Only she’s usually not home by this time.”

“You could make it yourself, couldn’t you?”

“Except I’m not sure how to make tea.”

“It’s easy, man. The easiest thing in the world. I’ll teach you.”

And that was how Patty ended up inviting Johann over to her house. Even though in her kitchen there was no kettle, no cute little spoons, no Lorna Doone cookies. She wasn't even sure there was tea. Johann said not to worry.

The problem was, Patty *did* worry. After Johann's mom dropped her off at her house, and she waved goodbye to the two of them as they drove off in their little boxy blue Volvo, she stepped inside and right away, all the smells hit her nose. She hadn't really thought of her house as *having* a smell before that. Of course, there was her mother's cooking: echoes of fried chicken, sautéed onions, banana bread. But there was also the smell of old coffee, cigarettes, beer spills on the carpet, her brother's feet, dog pee. Maybe she was just noticing them for the first time, because she'd been in someone else's house, smelling *their* house's smell. Johann's house smelled like bleach and lilacs. Her house smelled like too many things all at once. And what would he think of the half-pink staircase? The super-high ugly green countertops? The parade of ants marching across the kitchen floor? The boxed-up things of her dad's that were still in the corner of the living room? Worse yet, what if her mom came home early, drinking her brandy and yacking at them while they were trying to make tea? She would ruin the whole thing.

Patty took out the broom and began sweeping the floor: pebbles of dog food, toast crumbs, coffee grounds. Could she transform this place into a kitchen she could invite Johann into? Jinx followed her around, wagging his tail, occasionally pausing at his food dish and thumping his tail on the ground.

"What are you cleaning up for?" David walked straight to the refrigerator without looking at her, pulled out the carton of milk and began drinking from the spout.

"Nothing. Because it looks gross."

The little bump in David's throat bounced up and down as he drank. She hated the gulping sound he made when he drank. It always made her want to kick him. Why couldn't he drink quietly like a normal person? *He'd* better not be around when she invited Johann over, she thought. Another thing that could ruin it.

"Just gonna get dirty again, anyway," he said, and belched loudly, sticking the now empty milk carton back in the fridge. "Besides, if you want to clean something, why not clean up the dog puke on the dining room rug? You know Mom's gonna step in it when she gets home. She always steps in it, wherever he pukes."

"Why don't you? You're the one who saw it."

"Oh, is that like a rule or something? Whoever sees the dog puke first must clean it up? Is it like one of the Ten Commandments? And Moses came down from the mountain and said, Thou Shalt Clean Up the Dog Puke if Thou is the First to Seeist the Dog Puke..."

"Shut up, ass-face!"

"Ass-face? Oh, you hurt my *feelings!*" David bunched up an imaginary skirt around his knees and kicked her neatly gathered pile of dirt across the kitchen floor. She swung the broom at him. Meanwhile, Gloria came through the front door with a bag of groceries. Jinx yelped with joy, leaping up and down.

"Oh! Jesus, what the hell is this? How is it neither of you kids is capable of seeing a puddle of dog vomit when it's right in front of your face? I just tracked it all over!"

"David saw it and didn't do anything!"

"Then David, get in here and clean it up!"

“You suck,” David whispered. Patty gave him the finger and swept the pile back together.

“Well, look at Suzie Homemaker,” Gloria said, setting the bag down on the kitchen counter. She put her hands on her hips and smiled at Patty. “Don’t knock yourself out, kid. We’re all going to be doing a lot more cleaning in the next week.”

“How come?”

Gloria poured a glass of brandy and pulled up the kitchen step-stool chair. “Listen, both you guys. Grandma is coming next Tuesday and she’s staying for two weeks. We’ve not only got to get this place looking halfway decent, we’ve got between now and then to become a *normal*, happy family. Got it?”

## Chapter Five

“Two whole weeks? Isn’t that kind of a long time?” Patty asked.

“She’s my mother, and that’s what she wants. What am I supposed to say to her - no? She thinks she’s helping. Helping me in my time of fucking crisis.” Gloria set down her glass and pulled a box of macaroni out of the cabinet. “This’ll be an adventure for her. None of my sisters have ever gone through a divorce. I’m sure she’ll have *loads* to say. I can’t wait.”

On Sunday and they were all under orders to spend the day cleaning. Gloria had stocked the kitchen with all the foods Grandma loved: tuna fish, coffee ice cream, skim milk cottage cheese, apple sauce, pretzel goldfish, and endless bottles of ginger ale, none of which any of them were supposed to touch until she arrived. David was set to work vacuuming and mopping the floors. Patty was to start upstairs with the bathrooms. The long, deep, claw-footed bathtub she scrubbed with Comet, careful not to grind the green powder into the fist-sized red poppies that Dad had, in a moment of creative inspiration, cut out of a spare end of wallpaper and glued around the base of the tub. The rest of the poppies lined the walls on all sides, their black eyes staring into the room.

There was another bathroom right next to that one, with an eight-foot-high shower stall. Patty scrubbed at the mildew-stained tiles as high as she could reach until her arms ached, but it didn't seem to make a difference. Black streaks mocked her from the corners.

“Mom, I can't get the crud off the shower.” Patty yelled down the stairs.

“What?”

“The black stuff. It won't come out.”

“Don't worry. Grandma only takes baths. We'll keep that door shut and she won't even know that bathroom is there.”

Patty dusted the railing of the staircase, then swept down the stairs, from the white side to the pink side. In the kitchen, Gloria was rolling out pie dough. A bowl of thickly sliced apples coated in brown sugar and sweet spices waited beside her.

“Wow, you haven't made a pie in a while.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing,” said Patty, wiggling her toes to get rid of the stairway dust that had collected there. Gloria loosened the sheet of dough from the black slate rolling board and folded it over. A crack erupted at its center, and it tore down the middle. Patty braced herself.

“God *damn* it!” Gloria threw down the spatula. It ricocheted off the stove burners and clattered against the spice rack. She reached above the oven (preheated to 350 degrees) to the liquor cabinet, pulled down the Seagram’s Seven and poured a glass.

“I don’t know why the hell I’m even making a goddamn pie.” Gloria sat on the yellow step stool and lit a cigarette.

“You can fix it. Just take these two parts like this, and press on it like--”

“Don’t touch it! Just get out, will you? Have you finished the bathrooms yet?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then start vacuuming. She’s going to be here tomorrow, for Christ’s sake.”

Gloria sighed cigarette smoke through her nose, grabbed a damp dish towel draped over the edge of the sink and wiped the flour from her hands. “I...I’m sorry, sweetie. I just – we’re running out of time.”

“It’s okay. But I don’t get why you’re so upset about a pie. You’ve made a million pies – they always turn out great.”

“Two weeks. She’ll be here for *two weeks*. What the hell am I going to do?”

Gloria looked around the kitchen, like she expected the walls to start coming down any minute.

“Well,” said Patty, opening the refrigerator which was entirely stuffed with green bottles of Canada Dry, “at least we got plenty of ginger ale.”

Gloria said nothing. When Patty turned to see what was wrong. Gloria's face was in her hands, tiny bits of pie dough in the hair around her forehead. Her shoulders hunched and shook. Was she crying? No – laughing. Laughing through her fingers. When she looked up and saw Patty standing in front of the waiting army of green bottles of Canada Dry lining the refrigerator shelves, she laughed harder.

“That we do, honey.” Patty wasn't sure what was so funny. She hadn't made a joke, had she? But it was best not to question it. She did a little ballet pirouet and ran back upstairs before the magic wore off. Sometimes after laughing like that, she would start crying, and Patty really didn't want to be there for that part.

Still breathing hard from running up the stairs she stopped short in the doorway to the bathroom.

The bucket of bleachy water was overturned. Sponges and rags lay soggy and scattered across the bathroom floor. Every item had been pulled out of the medicine cabinet and was lying in the sink. The jar of aspirin, the nail clippers, the cotton balls, the Q-tips, Patty's toothbrush. An old lipstick that Patty had snatched from the bottom of Gloria's purse to see how it looked on her now lay crushed on the wet bathroom tiles, an angry lightning bolt of red drawn across the floor tiles. Even the wastebasket was tipped over.

How long had she been downstairs? It couldn't have been more than five minutes.

“David!” she yelled down the stairs. Her voice sounded too high, like somebody else's.

“What?”

“Did you just come up here? Were you messing around in the bathroom? Did you knock over my bucket?”

“Dorkface, I have better things to do than fuck around with your stupid bucket!”

“Well, you don’t have to be such a butthead about it!”

“Knock it off, both of you! You’re giving me a migraine!” came Gloria’s voice from the kitchen.

Patty returned to the bathroom. The air in the room was cold and tense, like a doctor’s waiting room. She crouched down and picked up the lipstick, set the wastebasket right, and threw it away.

“What’s the matter?” Patty asked, sponging up the soapy water and wringing out the sponge in the bucket. “Are you mad? Did we do something?”

She scrubbed away the jagged lipstick smear. The Ghost Lady said nothing.

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When Grandma arrived, the house never been so clean. They had a new set of rules, and everybody had to follow. No swearing, no throwing balls for Jinx in the house, no playing loud music downstairs. After David took her suitcase upstairs to the guest bedroom, Grandma parked herself in the most comfortable armchair in the living room and read paperback murder mysteries. She always wore a dress, stockings and low-heeled pumps, and sat in the same exact position, with her ankles crossed. Patty asked her mother if Grandma ever wore pants.

“Nope.”

“Not even when she’s working in the garden?”

“Grandma doesn’t *work* in the garden. She does no physical labor. Therefore, she doesn’t *own* a pair of pants.” Gloria’s voice rose in pitch gradually as she explained. She was preparing a tray of tea and cookies. They spoke in lowered voices, because Grandma was in the next room. Patty was filling up a tiny sugar bowl that matched the ceramic tea pot. She paid very close attention to the process. She wanted to learn as much as she could about tea before Johann came over. She hadn’t told her mother about him, yet. That would have to wait until after Grandma’s visit.

“This is gonna be fun. We never have tea, do we?”

“Don’t say that in front of her.”

“Why not?”

“Just don’t, okay? It’ll lead to a discussion I don’t want to have. Trust me.”

Patty walked behind Gloria, carrying the sugar bowl and the cream pitcher. Gloria carried a tray with the steaming teapot, the cups, spoons and slices of lemon on a little saucer. That must be a tea-tray, thought Patty, and the verse from *Alice in Wonderland* came to her:

*Twinkle, twinkle, little bat*

*How I wonder where you’re at*

*Up above the world so high*

*Like a tea-tray in the sky*

Or was it: How I wonder *what* you’re at? But that didn’t make sense. But neither did a bat the size of a tea-tray. Maybe if you were British--

“Patty, didn’t you hear me? I said, Grandma needs the sugar!”

“There’s no hurry, dear – it’s still quite hot.” Grandma was stirring her cup slowly, holding the saucer just above her lap. Her bifocals reflected the pale afternoon light, turning them into two opaque windows. Patty couldn’t see what she was thinking. Her mouth was a thin, turned-down little bow. Her hair was a little bit whiter since the last time Patty had seen her, but still in the exact same shape, short, rippled and crinkled like a ball of tin foil, and combed close to her head.

Patty passed the sugar and sat on the floor next to the coffee table. Gloria opened her mouth for a short intake of breath that made Patty brace for being told to sit on a chair like a lady, but Grandma spoke instead.

“Do you have any prospects of work, yet, Gloria?”

Gloria swallowed, the steam from the cup fogging her glasses for a second. She set the cup down. Patty saw her mouth take the same shape, the same pinched little bow as Grandma’s—then it was gone.

“Well, it’s only part-time. And temporary, but the Governor’s Equal Rights Council needs an interim coordinator.”

“Equal Rights Council? Now, has that got to do with the Negroes?”

A flush of salmon-pink crept up Gloria’s neck up to her cheeks. “Well...yes, and Native Americans, Hispanics and Chicanos, and we’re going to have a few hundred Vietnamese immigrants in the city later this year, they say.”

“Chicanos, now what are they? Are they the Mexicans?”

“Mexican-Americans, Mama. They were born in the United States.” Gloria poked her spoon at a slice of lemon floating in her tea.

“And what exactly does this council do for them?”

Gloria set her cup down and adjusted her glasses. Her voice rose high and thin, a tone Patty had never heard before. Like someone was slowly strangling her, the voice being squeezed out. She thought of a Tom and Jerry cartoon, when the cat would have the mouse in his fist, clutching him by the neck, the tiny feet and tail dangling in midair.

“Well, the main purpose of the council is to prevent employment discrimination and create job opportunities. It involves lawyers and community advocates--”

“And yet, you’re neither. What use would they have for *you*?”

The color deepened on Gloria’s cheeks. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Her eyes fell to the coffee table.

*Say something, Mom.* Patty tried to send the thought to her by telepathy. Why couldn’t she say it? Why couldn’t she tell Grandma that she was friends with the Governor? That she had helped him get elected, that she had been working with the people on that committees for years – that she knew all of them? Like she’d told David and her a million times.

“I never could understand why you’re so interested in the Negroes, Gloria,” Grandma continued. “Why, I remember when you were in college how you wanted to go to Mississippi and register Negro voters, do you remember?”

“Yes, and you said over your dead body.” Gloria took a Kleenex from the box on the table and wiped the vapor off her glasses.

“And look what happened to that Jewish boy from Chicago. Found dead in a swamp. A dreadful thing to happen to a young man in college. I thought *that* at least would discourage you, but after all this time, haven’t you developed any new interests?”

“Mama, this is what I *do*. I don’t know *how* to do anything else.”

“I simply can’t believe you can’t do better for yourself, dear. Couldn’t you take a typing class and find a secretarial job? Perhaps in a doctor’s office – some place where you can meet a man before too much time goes by?”

Gloria lit a cigarette. So much for trying not to smoke in front of Grandma. Before Grandma could say anything about it, Patty spoke up.

“Actually, Grandma, we don’t say ‘Negroes’ anymore.”

Twin streams of smoke shot out Gloria’s nose like a cartoon dragon. “Patty!” she said in a sharp whisper. Grandma ignored her.

“What *do* we say, dear? What are they telling you in school these days?”

Grandma sipped her tea and looked at Patty, the bifocal reflection flashed for an instant like a camera bulb. The turned-down little bow-mouth became a stretched ribbon of pink lipstick. A smudge of it marked the rim of her teacup. Patty thought about the jagged smear on the bathroom floor.

“Now we say Black. Or African American.”

Grandma lowered her cup and brushed a tiny poof of dog hair from her skirt. “My, it certainly is a *liberal* school, isn’t it?”

Gloria let out a smoky sigh. Patty squeezed lemon into her tea and stirred it. Instantly, a swirl of tiny white flecks, like a school of mosquito larvae, swam to the surface of her cup.

“Eew! Mom, something really weird just happened to my tea! Look!”

Gloria leaned over and looked.

“Patty, you’re not supposed to put both lemon *and* milk into your tea!”

“Is that what happens?”

“Yes, that’s what happens.”

“Well, how was *I* supposed to know?”

Gloria took off her glasses and rubbed her forehead. Patty had screwed things up again.

“I’ll just dump this out and start over again,” Patty said and headed to the kitchen with her cup. So much for pretending tea was a normal thing that they had all the time. At least she hadn’t done it in front of Johann.

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“So, you’re like, not gonna come out of your room the whole time she’s here, or what?”

Patty was standing in the doorway of David’s bedroom swinging the door back and forth, seeing if she could create enough breeze to blow the pages of David’s book, *Slaughterhouse Five*. She thought she saw a few strands of hair on his forehead move, but the pages of the stiff little blue paperback looked like a tornado wouldn’t ruffle them. David’s bedspread was rumpled and covered with Oreo crumbs. His head was propped up on three pillows. He wiggled his bare toes at her.

“Kiss my feet first. Then maybe I’ll come downstairs.”

“Puke. I wouldn’t kiss your feet if it was to cure cancer.”

“Stupid. How could kissing feet cure cancer?”

“I’m just saying.” Patty climbed up onto the bedroom door, a foot on each doorknob, and swung back and forth in a wide arc, propelling herself along by pushing off the ceiling.

“Mom hates it when you do that. She says you’re gonna bust the doors.”

Patty made one last push, leapt off the doorknob and landed in the middle of David’s bed. The box of Oreos tumbled over and spilled. David nearly missed a stomp to the stomach.

“Jesus Christ, you moron! You almost killed me.”

Patty grabbed an Oreo, split it in two and began eating the cream out. She poked David repeatedly in the side with her left toe. He ignored her. She couldn’t see his face behind the cover of the book.

“Are you at least coming down to help Mom set the table?”

“That’s your job, freak,” he said, flipping a page.

“Unh-uh. Not tonight. She says because I helped cook, you gotta set the table.”

David rolled over on his stomach and set the book down. He reached for the ball-clacker and set it into motion.

“Did you know,” he said, “that in World War II, the United States bombed a German city so bad the whole thing just exploded into flames?”

“You mean, like Hiroshima?”

“Yeah, only not an atom bomb. Regular bombs. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Until it made so many fires, they made like, one giant fire. And the fire got so hot, even the bricks in the walls burned. People were boiled alive in their bathtubs.”

Patty swallowed. The Oreo felt scratchy in her throat. She suddenly really needed a glass of water. *Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack*, went the ball-clacker.

“So...what did they do to *us*? The people in that town? Must have been something really bad.”

David stuck a pencil between one ball and another, bringing the perpetual motion to a dead stop.

“They made glassware.”

“Huh?”

From downstairs, they heard Gloria’s voice calling them to dinner with that scary tone, the tone that said *you’ll be sorry if you don’t*.

“We gotta get down there, David. Mom’s gonna be pissed. And Grandma’s gonna think you’re rude.”

David set the book down and heaved himself up. “You’re right, we have to proceed with our meaningless lives.”

Patty followed him down the hall. “You better not say that kind of stuff in front of Grandma.”

“*You better not say that kind of stuff in front of Grandma,*” David parroted her in a nasal whine.

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“I must have been out of my mind.” Gloria was crumpling an apron in her hand staring at the dirty dishes on the stove. The remains of the pot roast was drying out in the roasting pan on the counter beside her. Dishes towered in the sink, floury measuring cups, gravy-clotted pans, cups and glasses. “Dinner was a disaster.”

“No it wasn’t,” Patty argued. She was trying to keep her voice down. Grandma and David were still at the dining room table. Gloria poured the freshly-perked coffee into the good silver coffee pitcher.

“Are we going to use that every night while she’s here?”

“I don’t know. Okay, Patty? I don’t fucking *know*.”

“I’m just wondering, because, it’s, you know, good. Like for dinner parties and stuff.”

“Well, I can’t bring this coffee pot out to the table, because she’ll *say* something. She’ll say,” and here Gloria squeezed her voice together and pinched her mouth in an imitation of Grandma, “My goodness, that’s an awfully *stained* pot. It looks as though it’s been through a war!”

Patty laughed, covering her mouth. She had a feeling Grandma wasn’t as hard of hearing as she pretended to be.

Gloria poured some Seagrams Seven into a shot glass and downed it. She poured a little more into her coffee cup. “Now, I just have to remember which cup is mine.”

“Yeah, don’t get it mixed up with hers. Patty tried her own imitation: “My goodness, this coffee tastes *odd*...” Gloria stifled a laugh as they returned to the dining room.

“You should sit down, dear,” said Grandma, “You’ve been on your feet all day.”

“Just bringing the coffee, Mama.”

“You shouldn’t go to the trouble. David here was just telling me about the essay he’s writing for his current events class. What is it again, dear?”

“The resettlement of Southeast Asian war refugees.” David slouched in his chair, stabbing his pie crust repeatedly with a fork, not looking up.

“Honestly, Gloria. Can you believe they give eighth graders such difficult topics to consider? Why, he’s only thirteen years old!”

“I picked the subject myself,” said David.

“David gets very good grades in school, Mama. His teachers always say he’s one of their brightest students. Why, David’s been cutting out newspaper articles on that subject for weeks, haven’t you, sweetie?”

David looked up at Gloria with one eye. A wing of lank, blonde hair covered the other one. “Can I be excused?” Gloria locked eyes with David and something silent and deadly passed between them. “I have homework,” he added.

Gloria excused him and poured the coffee.

“You shouldn’t have bothered, dear, but I’ll take sugar, please.” Gloria returned to the kitchen to fetch the sugar bowl.

Patty cleared the table, and started on the dishes. Through the open kitchen door she could hear their conversation.

“Have you been invited anywhere since this happened?”

“Invited anywhere? What do you mean, Mama?”

“I mean, have you any friends who will still socialize with you? Sometimes people feel, well, awkward about inviting a divorced woman to a dinner party unaccompanied. I would hate to see you spending all your evenings alone. You used to have such a lively social life. I quite envied that in you.”

Patty tried to make as little noise as possible as she stacked the dishes, her ears listening for clues in the long silence that followed.

“Well, no, Mama. I *haven't* been spending all my evenings alone. I have other friends who are single.”

“It’s just terrible to see you like this, dear. You had so much going for you, with this new house and all. And look at you now. How are you going to live? It’s as if you’re only half a person.”

Patty turned the water on high and used the spray-hose against the pot roast pan, scouring it as loudly as possible. Before long, Gloria came in and shut the kitchen door behind her. She pulled down the brandy from the cabinet. Patty turned off the water and dried her hands.

“Did you hear what she said to me?” Gloria asked in a hoarse whisper. She didn’t look up. She was leaning against the counter, speaking into the glass.

“It’s not true,” said Patty. Gloria seemed to be sinking, shrinking into herself. Not knowing what to do, Patty put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s not true, Mom. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

Gloria took off her glasses and sat on the footstool chair. “Why did I invite her here? What did I think I was going to get out of it?” Her voice choked and she rubbed her eyes.

“She’s...” Patty couldn’t think of the words. Grandma had always been like that – with her pinchy little voice, all perfume-smelling with her rickety little legs and thin little lipstick mouth. She lived a thousand feet above everyone else, even though she wasn’t even five feet tall. Why *did* Mom invite her?

Gloria was crying now, her shoulders shaking, her face in her hands. Grandma was well out of earshot, in the living room with her Agatha Christie paperback. Over the house, a cold gust of wind blew, pattering acorns onto the roof.

## Chapter Six

“Your grandma still at your place?” Heidi asked Patty at lunch, her mouth full of peanut butter.

“Yeah. Four more days.”

“You make it sound like a prison sentence,” said Linda.

“It kind of is,” said Patty. She was looking over at the table of the quiet, nerdy and sissy boys to see if Johann had sat down yet. He had been sitting there the last few days, ever since he got into an argument with Larry Schultz, after Larry said something about Africa that made him mad. Larry was a lot bigger than Johann, and there was no way Johann could beat him in a fight, so he’d walked away and got called a sissy. Patty had only heard about it because she was in the bathroom when it happened. So, is that how boys get to be sissies, she wondered. They back down from one fight, then next thing you know they’re sitting at the sissy table?

The thing was, the boys who were called nerds and sissies were the most interesting ones. Like Arnold Jenson, who could play Mozart on the piano, and Lance Hagan, who could draw amazing cartoon pictures, and even got in trouble once for one he did of the principal. These were the boys Johann was sitting next to now, although

they didn't seem to have much to say to each other. They all looked equally miserable. Patty thought of a pet store she'd once visited, where she asked the pet store owner what two mangy-looking gerbils were doing in the rat cage.

"Gerbils can be mean," the pet store man had explained. "Hamsters, too. So whenever one of them is getting beaten up by the others, we put him in with the rats. The rats always leave everybody alone. They're the nicest of the rodents."

Patty figured the nerdy/sissy table must be like that. The rat cage of the boys' tables.

"Why don't you ask Johann to eat with us?" Linda suggested. She'd finally gotten Patty to tell her what was going on, why she wasn't waiting for the bus with her. That she had started walking home with Johann and taking the later bus home. Not every day, but most days.

The thing was, it was only after school that he spoke to her. Besides that, he just kind of waved to her in the hallway, and ran to his next class. It was weird. It was like their whole friendship only began after the afternoon bell rang, and then he'd have a million things to talk about as they were walking. Then the next day in the hallway, it was back to the wave-and-run routine.

"I don't know. I think maybe he's afraid to get teased."

"He's sitting with two guys who get called fags all the time," Heidi pointed out.

"Sitting with girls is worse," said Patty.

"You think?" Linda asked.

"Girls like us? Yeah. She's right." Heidi poked her straw in and out of her carton of milk.

Just the day before, Johann had asked her, “When can I see your house, Patty?”

“Um...as soon as my grandmother leaves – next weekend.”

“Is she ill or something?”

Patty had to think about how to answer this.

“It’s complicated. Let’s just say it’ll be a whole lot easier when she’s not there.”

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Two ginger ale bottles remained in the refrigerator. Patty could now see what was behind them: jars of mustard and pickles, the leftover asparagus from a week and a half ago, the glowing light bulb. Three more days to go and grandma would be gone. Gloria had started talking to herself in the kitchen. Every night she prepared dinner after dinner, her knuckles red from dish detergent, fingers trembling as she turned the greasy pages of her cookbooks, mixing sauces, grating blocks of cheese, buttering baking pans, smoking cigarette after cigarette. At night, after everyone was in bed, Patty heard her crying a couple of times. Patty and David were spending almost all their time in their rooms now, just waiting for it to be over.

The telephone rang, and Patty answered it.

“Hey kiddo, what’s happening?”

“Hi Dad! Are you coming this Saturday?”

“Of course I’m coming. Don’t you remember? We’re going to the zoo with Lorraine and Sarah and Todd.”

“No, it’s just that...I was afraid you were going to say you weren’t coming because then...” Because then what? What would she do? Run away from home and

never come back? Set herself on fire and jump off the roof? She suddenly realized she had been hanging on to Saturday like it was her parachute out of a crashing airplane. It was the one day she knew she could escape the house completely.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be there. How’s your grandma?”

“She’s okay.”

“You and David having a nice time with her?”

“Yes.”

“Great. Well, hey, listen sweetie, can you do me a favor? This week, can you and David just be ready and waiting on the front steps when I come by? That way, we can just all get in the car and go. Lickety split.”

“How come?”

“Well, it’s the *car*, sweetie. You see, I need to keep my foot on the gas pedal or it might stall.”

“Really, that’s weird. It didn’t have that problem before.”

“Listen, just tell David, okay? I’ll call again tomorrow to remind you.”

David was upstairs in his room, more than halfway done with Slaughterhouse Five now. He was in one of his typical poses, on his back, feet against the wall where there were already two large gray smudges above the bed to mark the spot.

“Dad says on Saturday to just be waiting outside on the steps for him so he doesn’t have to get out of the car.”

David laughed through his nose, that snorting laugh he always did when he thought something was stupid, or was about to say something mean.

“What?”

“Gee, I wonder why he doesn’t want to come in the house?” David said, not taking his eyes off the book. One corner of his mouth was turned up – his tricky smile.

“He said something’s wrong with the car.”

“Is *that* what he told you? Yeah, whatever.”

“What? What’s the big deal?”

David flopped the book down. “Don’t you get it? He doesn’t want to run into Grandma, you moron.”

“I’m not a moron, butthead!”

“Whatever. Message received. I get it. You and me out front. One pm Saturday. *Bor-ees and Natasha jomp into getaway car. Anything else?*”

“No, butthead.”

“Great. Well, you know where the door is,” he returned his face to the book, and pointed at the exit with his thumb.

Patty slammed the door behind her. “You’re such a--” she stopped herself just in time. Grandma was right downstairs. Why did David have to be such a jerk? Why did he have to make her feel stupid all the time? And was he right? Was Dad really lying about the car engine? Was *everybody* afraid of Grandma?

Later that evening, Patty was helping Mom lay out the dishes of mashed acorn squash and green beans while she brought out the meatloaf. Grandma unfolded her napkin and smoothed it onto her lap. David dragged Jinx onto the back porch, where he had been exiled for every dinnertime since Grandma’s first day, when he put his head between her legs and whined for a piece of roast chicken.

When everybody was seated, Grandma began cutting her meatloaf into tiny cubes, immersing each in the pool of gravy on her plate before eating it.

“Well, David, you certainly have been quiet all day. I wasn’t even sure you were home.”

“Oh. I’ve been reading.”

“What are you reading, dear?”

“It’s uh... a book about World War II.”

“How interesting. Fiction or nonfiction?”

“Fiction. Hey, Grandma weren’t you in the war? Weren’t you like an army nurse or something?”

Grandma’s eyes flickered for a moment and fell to her plate. She seemed to be having trouble swallowing. She took a sip of water and cleared her throat.

“That was Aunt Phoebe, David,” said Gloria.

“Yes, that was my sister. She was a nurse in the medical corps before she enrolled in medical school.”

“Did she go to Germany?”

“No, she was in England and France. Could you please pass the salt, dear?”

Patty passed the salt. David went on:

“She must have seen a lot of bad injuries. I read somewhere that over a hundred thousand limbs were amputated, and there’s all these old guys walking around England with no arms and stuff—”

“That’s hardly talk for the dinner table, David,” said Gloria. “The point is, your great aunt Phoebe had a very interesting life. Did you know that she was the first woman

in her university to complete a medical degree? She made history. She also started a doctors committee to protest the execution of the Rosenbergs in the 1950's," said Gloria.

"Who were the Rosenbergs?" Patty asked.

"They were a married couple accused of being communist spies for Russia back in the Blacklist days," said Gloria. "It was a terrible time in our history."

"Wow, it must have been dangerous for her to protest that," said David. "*She* could have been blacklisted. I guess Aunt Phoebe was pretty cool."

"Yes, and then she died of lung cancer from smoking all those cigarettes," said Grandma, crumpling her napkin into an angry ball. Her voice was sharp and a little too loud. Little crimps appeared at the corners of her lipsticked mouth. "Filthy habit for a woman."

Everybody looked at Grandma, but she didn't look back. Grandma was looking only at her plate, cutting her meatloaf into smaller and smaller cubes, her breath whistling loudly through her nose. Gloria's face turned pink.

"Is the meatloaf alright, Mama?"

"It's a bit dry, dear. You know, I always add a little tomato juice--"

And just like that, Aunt Phoebe was dismissed from the conversation. Patty and David looked at each other, then at Gloria, whose face had gone from pink to gray, whose fingers were trembling as she apologized for her meatloaf. How was this happening? How did Grandma do it? If either she or David were stupid enough to criticize their mom's cooking, they could expect to be smacked in the head, or at least screamed at.

But there was something else. Grandma had actually seemed *upset*, like her feelings were hurt. Patty had never seen her that way before. It must have had something

to do with Aunt Phoebe. Later, when they were washing the dishes, Patty decided to ask her Mom about it.

“Honey, let’s just say they didn’t always get along, those two,” Gloria whispered. She used the hose spray again on the roasting pan, even though it was clean already, but it made a good, loud noise. “Phoebe always got more attention, because she was the older sister, and she was rebellious. And then, she was the one who ended up marrying a doctor and having a son – the only two things your grandmother ever wanted, and she didn’t get either one. Being the wife of a regional seed and fertilizer distributor is not exactly prestigious in Nebraska.”

“You mean, Grandma wasn’t happy with having three daughters?”

“Are you kidding? She still hasn’t forgiven me for being born without a penis.”

Gloria dried her hands and hung up the damp dish towel. She refilled her glass with brandy and slumped onto the step-stool with a loud sigh.

“I was the last one born. Her last hope. You know, between my sister Jeanne and me, there was a boy. Did I ever tell you that?”

“No,” said Patty.

Gloria’s voiced dropped to a slurry whisper. “The baby died in his sleep six weeks after he was born. She had just turned forty. The doctors told her it was risky to try again, but she couldn’t stand the thought of going through life without producing a son. And two years later, she was pregnant with me.”

“So you were like, her last chance?”

“And back then, there were no ultrasounds – no way to tell if it was a boy or a girl until the kid was born.”

“So, what happened when they told her you were a girl?”

“Honey, you think I’m *kidding* when I say she never forgave me?” Gloria’s voice was breaking up now, the tears and the brandy making it thin and raspy. And then when *my* first child was a boy...” Gloria trailed off and didn’t finish.

“You mean – are you saying she’s jealous?”

“Damn right, she’s jealous. Of Aunt Phoebe, of her daughters -- all of us had sons by the time we were twenty five.”

“But that’s...that’s crazy,” Patty whispered.

Gloria gave a big clown smile and elaborately touched the tip of her nose with her finger. “Bingo!”

Patty laughed, even though there shouldn’t be anything funny about it. It was the face Gloria made whenever she did that, like Patty had just won the game.

“Sweetie, why don’t you go on up to bed? It’s late.”

Patty decided to go out the back door, so she didn’t have to walk past Grandma in the living room. She paused at the doorway.

“Mom?”

“Yeah, kiddo?”

“Only three days left.” Patty crossed her fingers with both hands, holding them up for her to see.

Gloria laughed, but her eyes were tired and red.

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It was Grandma's last day. Gloria was in the kitchen, making lunch. Tuna salad sandwiches and cucumber and tomato slices, pickles and potato chips. Patty was trying to find the glass bluebird that was supposed to be on the third bookshelf, but had disappeared again. Usually, when this happened, it would show up the next day in her room or David's room in some funny place, like in her sock drawer, or sitting in the middle of David's army men, sleeping amongst the machine gun nests and bayonets. Usually when she just told the Ghost Lady to give it back, she would. But the Ghost Lady was acting weird. Every night for the last week, Patty had been woken up by soft footsteps on the stairs, strange steps, too light to cause the creaking and squeaking whenever anyone else used the stairs. And the bluebird wasn't the only thing that was missing. Hats, mittens, books had all been disappearing and showing up in strange places.

"What are you doing, child?" Grandma looked up from her book and asked.

Patty was looking under the bottom flap of the sofa. "Nothing. Just looking for something."

"It's always best to retrace your steps. That's what I always do."

Patty couldn't tell her what she was looking for. Gloria told her not to say anything about the missing bluebird, because Grandma had given the whole set of glass birds to them – the robin, the cardinal, the chickadee and the bluebird, ten years ago. It was always the bluebird the Ghost Lady took. Of course, Gloria didn't believe her about the Ghost Lady, and just thought Patty had taken it and lost it. She had to find it before Grandma looked at the shelf and noticed it was gone.

Suddenly a skittering of toenails came from the living room. Patty looked up. Jinx was crouched low on the floor, trembling violently, his back bowed upward, neck outstretched and mouth grimacing.

“Oh, god, he’s having a fit.” Gloria ran in from the kitchen, grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the kitchen, leaving a trail of urine behind him.

Jinx had epilepsy. Every few weeks he’d suddenly keel over and begin shaking uncontrollably. He’d lose control of his legs as they crumpled and flapped beneath him. He would spew white foam from his mouth, vomit, urinate and crap all over the floor for about fifteen minutes, then just as quickly, return to normal and act as if nothing had happened.

“Jesus, why the hell do you have to do this now?” Gloria said to Jinx. Patty came in the kitchen just in time to see the eye-rolling stage. It isn’t often you see the whites of a dog’s eyes. His head tipped all the way over to one side, like he was trying to look at something on the ceiling with one eye. Then the eye rolled back as his lips stretched to show all his back teeth, drool dripping. It used to scare her, but she was used to it now.

“Go clean up the piss.” Gloria handed her a sponge.

Patty wiped the floor in quick swipes, hoping not to arouse Grandma’s attention. But Grandma wasn’t looking in her direction. She was looking at the shelf where the bluebird was supposed to be.

“Weren’t there five birds in this set? I distinctly remember a blue jay. Or a bluebird, perhaps.”

In the kitchen a glass was breaking. Gloria cursing. Patty brought the sponge back to wring it out in the sink and nearly slipped on a smear of dog diarrhea running across

the floor. Gloria was picking up the shards of a wine glass that had fallen out of the liquor cabinet. She poured whiskey into a shot glass and downed it, took the sponge from Patty and began working on the shit smear. Jinx's legs were splayed out in three different directions, his teeth clicking together, tags jangling. Patty thought about poor old Bob, with his shaking disease, and how Jinx was kind of doing the same thing.

“Is everything alright in there?”

“Yes!” Patty and Gloria responded in unison.

“Where the fuck is that bird?” Gloria's voice was hoarse from drinking so fast.

“I told you, I didn't take it!”

“Put him in the basement,” she said, pointing to Jinx.

“The basement? But mom, it's dirty and nasty down there. What if--”

“*Do what I say.*” Gloria's face was about two inches from hers and she had that look in her eye, like when Jinx had a bone, and snarled and tried to bite you if you got too close to it. Two things totally changed his personality, epilepsy and bones. But with Gloria you never knew what it would be. Patty didn't say another word. She pulled open the big deadbolt lock on the basement door and picked up the dog in her arms. He was heavy, even heavier now that he couldn't control his limbs. Along her forearm she could feel the warm, wet shit that had trickled down his back legs.

Suddenly David was on the stairs behind her. “Here, give him to me.”

He took the dog from her arms and together they walked down the dark, warped wooden stairs. Gloria shut the door behind them, leaving them in pitch blackness.

“Mom? Mom, it's dark--” Patty said, but Gloria didn't answer.

“Forget it, just turn the bottom light on,” said David. Patty felt around until she found the switch at the bottom of the stairs next to the door to the garage. The lightbulb above flashed blue and popped out.

“Shit! Try the one above the washing machine!” David was struggling with Jinx’s kicking legs. Cobwebs tangled in Patty’s hair as she ran to the washing machine, knocking her shins on boxes and gardening tools on the way. She pulled the string to turn on the light, and sighed with relief when it went on.

“There’s another one over the workbench, there.” David set the dog down on the damp, dirty cement floor. Patty ducked under the octopus arms of the furnace and pulled the next string. Now they could see. Jinx was shaking harder now, all four legs splayed out like a seal, eyes rolling. Foam spilled from his chin. Patty ran to the clothes basket and brought a dirty towel to wrap around him. She stood next to David and they watched him. Suddenly, both lights popped and went black.

“What the fuck is going on?” David’s voice said in the pitch black.

“Ghost Lady, stop it! Please!” Patty was crying now.

“Who are you talking to? Here, hold him, I’m gonna get the flash light.”

Soon, they were sitting in an illuminated circle, on the floor, the shaking dog between them, David holding the flashlight. Patty hugged Jinx hard through the towel and leaned against David, who didn’t move away or even say anything about it. They sat like that, not speaking, until the fit passed.

## Chapter Six

When Patty pushed the door open Jinx came charging in from the kitchen and practically knocked her over. He jumped up to lick her face then sniffed Johann's crotch, jumped up to lick her again, sniffed Johann's crotch. He could do two things at once, Jinx could.

"Sorry, he gets kind of excited."

"That's okay. We had a dog once that looked sort of like him." Johann scratched Jinx's ears.

"What happened?"

"Gave him away to our gardener when we moved. Then he got run down by a car."

"That musta sucked."

Patty hung up their coats, so when Gloria got home she wouldn't be yelling about coats all over the place and whose is this one, anyway? She wanted everything to go right. But she was in luck. Neither her mom nor her brother were home. She could feel it, the empty, waiting feeling. When nobody was home, the Ghost Lady got bigger, somehow. Jinx followed them into the kitchen and she and Johann had to take turns standing on the step stool to get the things for the tea.

"So, this is going to be easy," Johann said, peering into a box of tea, "because you have tea bags. When it gets a difficult is when there's no bags. Then you've got to

measure and stuff. But this way, we just put in two bags and the hot water. You pull ‘em out after five minutes so it doesn’t get bitter.”

Patty watched Johann make the tea, glad that he had finally gotten some long pants. Baggy, navy blue corduroys with little cuffs on the bottom. They were actually pretty nerdy, but at least his knobby pink knees weren’t showing anymore.

Patty wanted to have the tea upstairs in her room, because David might come home at any minute, and she didn’t want him around. Johann carried the teapot and buttered toast upstairs, and Patty carried the cups and cream pitcher. They had already mixed the sugar into it.

“Wow,” Johann said as he looked around her room. She had cleaned it, vacuumed it, even. The rest of the house was still pretty decently clean from when Grandma was there. This was about the best time there was going to be for Johann to get a good impression. He studied the posters of the Beatles, the pictures from last year’s National Geographic calendar of polar bears, seals, and great white sharks.

“Who’s this guy?” he asked, pointing at the poster of Jimi Hendrix.

“Really? You don’t know who Jimi Hendrix is?”

“Oh...yeah. Sure. I’ve heard of him,” said Johann. He flipped his hair out of his eyes and looked around for a place to put the tea.

Patty arranged everything on the floor, and they sat down together with the tea and toast in the middle.

“It’s okay if you don’t know who he is,” Patty said. She could tell he was feeling stupid for not knowing. “He’s dead, anyway.” Johann looked up, surprised. She realized that probably needed an explanation. “I mean, everybody thinks I’m weird because I like

music from bands that are broken up, or from people who are dead. Instead of listening to, like..."

"Like the Bay City Rollers? The Bee-Gees? That crap?"

"You hate the Bee-Gees too?"

"Oh, God, they suck."

They hated the same music. That had to be good.

"Can we hear something, now?" he said, looking at her little purple turntable.

"What?"

"Whatever's your favorite."

In a kind of happy daze, Patty flipped through her small collection of albums, most of which she'd gotten from her 20-year old cousin Maggie, who didn't listen to them anymore. The Beatles were all in one section, then there was her Simon and Garfunkle, Bob Dylan, The Byrds, Donovan... it was the Donovan she was pulling out when she looked over at Johann and saw him staring into the hallway. Patty realized she'd forgotten to close the door. Then she noticed Johann's face. Blank expression, even paler than usual.

"Patty?" Johann kept his eyes on the hallway. "There's someone watching us." He put his tea cup down on the carpet in front of him, staring, unblinking. "I mean... isn't there?"

Patty looked in that direction. He was right, of course. She had been watching since they'd walked in the door. What should she tell him? How much could Johann see? There was that electric feeling, and that weird change in the light, right where he was

looking. Like the air was rolling itself into a ball, concentrating, thickening itself. But it was Johann who spoke again, still staring at it.

“It’s an old lady, isn’t it?”

Patty felt something like an egg yolk bursting open inside her. Like she was leaking out over all her edges. Tears sprung into her eyes and she felt her limbs grow soft and weak, her bony butt sinking into the carpet. The record album slipped from her hands and fell into her lap. He could see her. He actually could.

“Yes,” she whispered. She reached to grab the record as it rolled out of the jacket, and tried to steady her hands from shaking.

Johann turned to her. The color was coming back into his face, but his blue eyes were still twice their normal size.

“You’re not afraid, are you? Don’t be afraid.” He reached out and took her hand. His fingers were small and cold. “I think she’s alright. I think she likes you.” He turned and looked again. “There, she’s gone, now.” And he was right.

Suddenly Patty didn’t want to play Donovan. It was too mellow. She wanted something louder, to get the cold out of the air, the weird cold the Ghost Lady always left behind when she went. They needed some loud rock and roll, before she came back. But it was good having Johann’s hand, too, and Patty would have to let go of it to put the record on. For a while, she sat there stupidly, not knowing what to do.

“Can we hear some Jimi Hendrix?” Johann asked. Patty nodded. It was perfect. She squeezed his hand a little, just before letting go, kind of to let him know she wasn’t letting go on purpose, or because she didn’t like it. Her hand came away sweaty, which was weird, because it was cold at the same time. As she put *Are You Experienced* on the

turntable, he studied the album cover. He poured tea into both their cups and chewed on a piece of toast, immersed in the photos of Jimi with his huge afro and bright red bell bottoms.

“Sound familiar?” Patty asked after a while.

Johann sighed and shook his head. “I’m not sure. He might be banned, maybe. In South Africa. But then, I probably heard him in England. I don’t remember.”

“Banned?”

Johann crossed his legs under him and looked out the window for a moment. “My father says our government bans stuff. Like, makes it illegal for us to see certain TV programs and listen to certain kinds of music. We don’t have freedom, like you’ve got here. And he said that’s why...” he stopped, turned around and looked into the hallway again. Patty got up and shut the door.

“Is that better?”

Johann looked at her. His expression changed, started to close up. “I’m not afraid of her. If that’s what you think.”

She sat down in front of him, and picked up her tea, careful not to spill it. “I know you’re not. So, tell me. What were you gonna say? That’s why what?”

Johann looked down at his hands. He looked like he was deciding something, like maybe his hands would tell him which way to go. His voice was quieter when he spoke again. “He said that’s why we keep moving around. To different countries.”

“I thought it was ‘cause of his job.”

“It is, but... It’s the other reason. He says it’s no good for us there now.”

“But what about your friends? Are you just supposed to--”

He cut her off, his voice suddenly clipped and cool, like a lid clapping down. “I’d rather not talk about it just now, actually.”

“I was just--”

“Can we talk about something else?” His blue eyes flashed at her between the silvery wisps of hair, going icy in a way that suddenly reminded her of David. “For instance, what are you going to do about this ghost?”

Patty wasn’t sure what to say. It was Johann who brought up the whole thing about moving to different countries in the first place, and now he didn’t want to talk about it. That was the second time he’d done that – suddenly changed the subject after almost telling her something. Was she just supposed to tell him everything about the ghost and her weird house, but let him keep all his secrets? But maybe he wasn’t being weird at all. Maybe *she* was the one who was weird. How was she supposed to know?

“Do? What do you mean, *do*? What am I *supposed* to do about her?”

“There are ways, you know. Ways of getting rid of them.” Johann picked a crumb off his pants.

“What do you know about it? *What* ways?”

Johann lay down on his side and propped his head up on one arm. He closed his eyes and sighed. “I think I like Jimi Hendrix,” he said.

Patty got down on her stomach and poked him in the ribs. He laughed, squinting his eyes together.

“Come on, *what* ways? I’ll tickle you.”

“You bloody *won’t*.” He grabbed her wrist and pretended to twist it, but she knew he wasn’t going to, really. He wasn’t like David. “Okay, I’ll tell you.” He sat up and

crossed his legs, and Patty did the same thing, and they sat there facing each other, and Johann's voice dropped to where she almost couldn't hear him above the music. It was as if he thought the Ghost Lady might be listening.

“We had this ghost back home, right?”

“Home where? England, Germany, or South Africa?”

“S'th Africa, silly. When I say *home*, that's what I *mean*, n'kaaaaaay??” He made his mouth really big on “okay,” imitating the Wisconsin way of saying it, which made Patty fall over and practically pee herself laughing.

“Stop laughing, this is serious,” he said, pulling on the toe of her sock, and Patty sat up again. “Our ghost *wasn't* a lady. It was this crusty old man ghost, who thought he still owned the place. He was always putting out the lights and slamming doors, sometimes right in your face.”

“Sounds mean.”

“He didn't want us there at all. I'd wake up in the middle of the night and he'd just be standing there, at the foot of my bed --”

“What did he look like?”

“A black shadow. Kind of scraggly hair. And he'd make these grumbling, mumbling noises like he was trying to tell me to piss off, but couldn't manage the speaking part.”

“The Ghost Lady doesn't say anything.”

“Maybe she can't. They can't all do everything. Some can't make themselves seen, some can't make themselves heard...”

“So, what are you? Some kind of a ghost expert, or something?”

Johann leaned back and folded his arms. “Do you want to hear how I got rid of him or don’t you?”

Patty apologized and told him to go on. Johann explained how their housekeeper, who was the only one who believed him about the geezer ghost, showed up at the house one morning with a bag of stinky herbs and a little carved wooden man with a terrible grimacing face and nails pounded into him all over.

“She said the herbs were a kind of *muti*, a medicine, like. And we were to burn them on a flat stone in the middle of the house. The smoke would chase him out. After that, the little man was to go under the *stoep* to keep the ghost from getting back inside.”

“Under the what?”

“The *stoep*. You know, the front door part of your house, where you step up—well, your house has one, doesn’t it? Where we came in.”

“Oh, the front porch, you mean?”

“Porch? I thought a porch was a kind of verandah.”

“A kind of what?”

Johann shook his hair. “Forget it. So Penelope burned the herbs and put the little man under the st—the porch, and, I swear it to Jesus, I never saw the ghost again.”

“Or heard him?”

“Or *anything*. He completely disappeared.”

Patti thought about this. The thing was, she wasn’t really sure she *did* want to get rid of the Ghost Lady. Especially to scare her away with a terrible little wooden man. It seemed sort of mean, somehow. Of course, it would be nice not to be woken up in the

middle of the night all the time with all the bumping and banging, and the being stared at. But she had a feeling the Ghost Lady wouldn't be so easy to get rid of.

“Do you know what was in the stinky herbs?” she asked.

Johann looked at the ceiling for a moment. “Yah, I guess that's a problem, isn't it? She said it was *muti*, so it could have been anything, really. It's just a Zulu word for medicine.”

“She was a Zulu? Your housekeeper?” A Zulu named Penelope? Johann's country was sounding weirder by the minute.

“Yah. So, I guess that's out. I mean, it's probably stuff that only grows in South Africa. I guess we could make an experiment. Try to put a potion together ourselves.”

“But how would we know how to get it right? What if we screw it up and end up with a whole bunch more ghosts by accident?”

Johann's eyebrows bunched together and he rolled over on his stomach and began picking at the carpet. He didn't have an answer for this. Then he looked up at her.

“You know, if ever you're frightened, Patty, I'll protect you. I'm not afraid of ghosts. Any ghosts.”

The late afternoon sun was shining pale on his blonde eyelashes and Patty felt that feeling again, like he was pulling at something inside her, right through her belly button, like she was a scarf unraveling and he had the end of the string. Then she said something really stupid.

“I'm actually older than you, you know.”

Johann's cheeks lit up and he sat up straight again, like a broomstick, like he always was at school. His voice went stiff and smooth at the same time, like a frozen lake.

"By six months only. And what's that supposed to mean, anyway?"

"Nothing, it's funny, that's all. You saying you're going to protect me when you're younger, shorter...I can probably even run faster."

"Funny? Are you getting a good laugh, then?"

"No! I didn't mean it like that. I just meant--"

"And I bet you *can't* run faster." Johann was looking at his feet now, the way he did that first day when they walked home together, when she asked him about how long his family would be in Wisconsin, and he wouldn't look at her.

He might go away now.

Suddenly Patty knew it – she was sure of it. He could just get up and leave and decide never to speak to her again. Unless she did something, right now. Her heart was beating hard when she reached for his hand. She squeezed it in hers but he still didn't look up. She leaned towards him to say something in his ear.

"I'll race you," she whispered.

He was down the stairs before she was, skipping two at a time. They practically knocked David over as he came up the walkway. They were laughing too hard to stop.

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“So, guys, what’s new?” Dad squirted mustard on his bratwurst, his eyes darting between the football game on the TV above the bar and Patty and David, both dipping their French fries into the same pool of ketchup. They were in the best booth at the Ground Round, and the place was filled with football fans wearing stupid red sweatshirts with the strutting, sneering Bucky Badger on the front. The badger himself was wearing a sweatshirt with a W for Wisconsin, but no pants. Why was it that nobody seemed to notice he wasn’t wearing any pants? Bucky Badger was an asshole, Patty decided. A pantsless asshole.

Patty hated football more than practically anything in the world. But at least the game was in Iowa today because otherwise Dad would be at it, and trying to drag them along to the freezing cold stadium, filled with beer-drinking, roaring fans, where they couldn’t even sit in the same section with Dad, because he couldn’t afford three tickets in that section, so her and David would sit behind the goal posts in Section Z. Their butts would freeze to the hard benches and while the band *played If You Want to Be A Badger, Just Come Along With Me*, and Patty and David would get so bored, they’d start throwing Ju-Ju-Bees at the backs of the heads of the people in front of them and then look all innocent when they’d turn around to see who did it. Always, the Ju-Ju-Bees would run out before halftime, and by the last quarter, she’d be numb in the fingers and toes and practically ready to cry, begging God for the stupid Badgers to lose again so they could go home. So today could have been worse.

“Patty has a new boyfriend.”

“Shut up!”

“He’s about three feet tall. Like a Hobbit, only skinny.”

Patty pushed David into the wall, and his Coke sloshed over the edge of the glass.

“Whoah, settle down, guys,” said Dad. “What’s your friend’s name, Patty?”

“Johann. And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Of course he isn’t. Johann. Is he German?”

“He’s from South Africa. And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Wow,” said David, “that’s the most information she’s given out, yet. I thought maybe he was a secret agent. Or a space alien.”

“Knock it off, David. Kid’s family must be from the Dutch, then. The what-do-you call’ems, the Boers.”

“The boars? So, that makes him a kind of piglet, doesn’t it?” David said, putting the last bite of his hot dog in his mouth. Patty picked up her fork and prepared to stab him with it.

“Leave your sister alone – Hey! Way to go! They’re on the thirty yard line!” Dad sort of half stood up to see over the heads of the people at the bar who were all jumping up and down and cheering. Patty took some of David’s onion rings while he was looking at the TV. A commercial came on and Dad sat back down again.

“So, he’s a nice kid, this Johann?”

“Yeah. He’s really smart.”

Dad took a fresh napkin and wiped his fingers. “He hasn’t uh...said anything to you about black people, has he?”

“What do you mean?”

Dad tossed the crumpled, greasy napkin into the little pile that was accumulating in the middle of the table. “It’s not a big deal, really, it’s just that, a lot of people from

that country kind of, well... have some attitudes about blacks that we wouldn't agree with."

"Are you saying is he prejudiced?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, has he said anything..?"

"I dunno. He likes Jimi Hendrix."

Dad took a swig from his beer and nodded. He looked like he was about to say something else, then suddenly Lorraine and Todd and Sarah were there.

Sarah ran over to Patty's side of the booth, which she had had all to her self, but not anymore. Dad made David switch places with him so he could sit next to Lorraine, which meant putting David next to Todd. David went silent and stared into his chocolate milkshake looking like he wanted to kill someone. Todd pretended not to care, studied the menu, drumming his fingers on the table under David's nose. David couldn't kill him with his mother right there.

"Did you kids wash your hands?"

Todd rolled his eyes, Sarah slunk down in her seat until her nose was level with the table.

"But I didn't poop, I only peed," Sarah protested.

"Poop, pee, who gives a shit?" Todd leaned across the table and tried to slap her with the menu, jostling David's elbow in the process.

"How'd you like a fork in the eye, buttface?" David said.

"Alright, all of you, that's enough!" Dad said. "Now as soon as you've ordered, you can go play pinball, but right now, no monkey business."

Sarah leaned over and asked Patty, “Does your mom make you wash your hands after you poop *and* pee? Or just poop?”

Patty had to think about it. She couldn’t remember Gloria ever telling her to wash her hands after anything. Except at other people’s houses, where they were supposed to be sure to use the guest towels, not the bath towels, and be sure not to leave smudges on them, which meant use the soap. Other people’s houses had a lot of rules to remember.

“How about we *not* talk about poop and pee at the table?” Dad said.

“I *like* that idea!” Lorraine beamed and squeezed him around the shoulders.

“I think I’m gonna puke,” said Todd. “Can we talk about puke at the table?”

David laughed, and then sort of caught himself, remembering to hate Todd.

“I want a fish and chips and a strawberry shake!” Sarah announced, flinging her menu down, slipping under the table, wiggling out the other end, and making a beeline for the pinball machines.

“Patty, could you go with her?” said Dad.

“Yeah,” said Todd. “Make sure she doesn’t get kidnapped by a child molester.”

“Or Ed Gien?” Patty suggested, squeezing out of the booth.

“That’s enough!” Lorraine said. “Okay, kids, let’s all agree. These are the words that are illegal at the table: No poop, no pee, no puke, and no Ed Gien!”

Patty wound her way through the kids at the game table and found Sarah trying to see over the top of the one of the pinball machines.

“I’m supposed to make sure Ed Gien doesn’t get you,” Patty said.

Two minutes later, they were back to the table, Sarah tugging at Lorraine’s sleeve. “I need more quarters, Mom. Who’s Ed Gien?”

“Sorry – that subject is illegal at the table,” said Lorraine, digging coins out of her wallet. Dad handed Patty three dollars.

Patty and Sarah played game after game of Dracula’s Castle, sharing a basket of yellow popcorn from the sputtering machine in the corner. Patty kept getting extra points every time she shot the steel ball into the little open coffin. Sarah would jump up and down while the point meter rolled, until the coffin spit the ball back out.

“So, who is he, Patty? Who’s Ed Gien?” Sarah asked.

“Really?” said Patty. “You really don’t know who he is?” She remembered these were the exact same words she’d said to Johann when he said he didn’t know who Jimi Hendrix was. She’d have to remember to tell him about Ed Gien, too. For sure he wouldn’t know. Patty was actually happy to tell Sarah the story, since Ed Gien was one of her favorite subjects.

“He was a strange little man who lived about sixty miles from here, in a little farm house, where he made deer sausage. He didn’t have a wife or kids. He lived all alone. But everybody in the town knew who he was, ‘cause they bought sausage from him. Only one day, this one lady disappeared. A lady who worked in a hardware store. And nobody knew what happened to her...”

Patty knew the story by heart, since Gloria had told her over and over. Gloria had only been a little girl at the time, but even in Nebraska, they knew about Ed Gien. It was in all the papers when the police came to get him. They found his house filled with pieces of women’s bodies hanging from the ceiling, his furniture made out of human skin, somebody’s heart boiling in a soup pan on the stove.

“Turned out he’d been digging up graves, stealing bodies, and he’d killed some other ladies, too, and cut them up and made things from them.” Patty didn’t leave anything out, and Sarah’s eyes grew to twice their normal size. Patty even taught her the Christmas song Gloria and her sisters learned in high school, *Deck the Halls With Bowels of Molly*.

“But he’s in jail, right?” said Sarah, not laughing anymore. Patty thought for a second about what would happen if she lied and said no, he escaped last week. But she could never play jokes like that. She had tried, but she just didn’t have the meanness.

“He’s in Mendota. Don’t worry.” Mendota was the state mental institution. “He’s an old man, now.”

David waved them over to tell them the food had arrived. Sarah raced over to the table, singing *Deck the Halls With Bowels of Molly* at the top of her lungs, swinging herself into the booth.

“Hey, didn’t we say no Ed Gien at the table?” Dad put down his fork.

“What’re you looking at me for? I’m not singing it,” Patty said.

David squeezed a glob of ketchup onto Sarah’s fish and chips.

“There, that’s the blood of Ed Gien’s latest victim,” he said. “A *lady*.”

“A lady with her *period*.” Todd added.

Sarah screamed. Patty couldn’t believe it. What a baby. Everybody in the restaurant was staring at them.

“Kids, now that is *enough!*” Lorraine looked at them all, really meaning it this time. “No more murder talk, or poopie talk, or ladies-with-their-periods talk. I mean enough is enough, for God’s sake!”

“Mom’s right! Let’s talk about flowers! And bunny rabbits,” said Todd, folding his hands under his chin like Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. David was having a seriously hard time not laughing.

Lorraine looked like she was about to cry. Sarah already was crying. What a stupid family, Patty thought. Was she really going to be related to them?

## Chapter Seven

“Butt face!”

“Dog!”

“Hunchback of Notre Dame!”

Patty didn’t bother looking at them anymore. She kept her back to the boys, stacking her books onto the locker shelf. One of them, Larry Shultz, stopped a few feet away from her, not content with being ignored.

“So, Lofthaus, how’d you get to be such a dog?”

Patty closed the locker door, softly, trying to pretend the voice was just the buzzing of an insect behind her.

“Hey, Patty – wait up!” Patty turned around. It was Linda clutching her books in front of her, she had to dodge to get around Larry Schultz.

“Oh, look at this. A double-dog show.” Snickers from down the hall. Other boys began gathering to watch the entertainment.

“They’re at it again, I see.” Linda said to her. The two of them quickened their pace. Between all the nerds at the lunch table, Linda probably got teased the least, maybe because her grades were so good. She was in all the accelerated classes, so it put her in that sort of invisible and despised category of smart, homely geeky girls, whereas Patty was actually in the slow math class, because of her numbers problem, which put her in the category of both retarded *and* ugly, so the jocks could really have a field day with her. Linda usually ignored the jocks. Not pretending to, the way Patty did. Linda really, honestly seemed not to hear them or see them.

“What’s the matter?” Larry and the other boys were still behind them. “You two scared of something?”

“Get lost!” said Linda.

“Oh, you want *me* to get lost, Beaver-teeth? Sorry, am I *interrupting* something? You and Lofthaus have a date or something? You guys lezbos?”

Hoots and hollers from down the hallway.

“Leave them alone, Larry.” It was Johann, suddenly appearing at Patty’s side. Larry’s friends stopped laughing. They all stared at Johann. Then they collected themselves around Larry. They stood a good three to four inches above Johann’s blonde head.

“Listen, shrimp-weasel,” Larry stuck his finger in Johann’s chest. “You have no idea how bad you’re gonna get yourself killed. You better think about it--”

“I said, piss off!” Johann yelled, taking a step forward.

“You little faggot!” Larry lurched forward, his hands grasping for Johann’s neck, But just then, Mr. Nelson, the assistant principal came running down the hall, his red neck folding over his shirt collar, as always.

“Boys! Knock it off, now!” He pushed them apart. “Who started this?”

“She did!” said two of Larry’s friends in unison, pointing to Patty.

“What?” Patty said.

“You’re all getting two hours of detention! Report to my office after school today.”

Linda, Johann and Patty walked off together.

“Bastards,” said Patty.

“That was quite brave of you,” said Linda to Johann.

“But you know what you did, right?” said Patty. “They’re gonna hate you now. Like they hate us.” She tried to look in Johann’s eyes to see what he was thinking, if he regretted it. But his hair was hanging down and he was looking at his feet. She couldn’t see what he thinking.

“So?” said Johann. “I hate *them* already. It might as well be mutual.”

“You’re in for it. That’s all I’m saying.”

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It was getting so that her room was the only place Patty wanted to be in the whole world. She shut and locked her door and put Rubber Soul on the stereo to push out the sound of their voices. She wondered if it was possible to live her whole life in her room. Could she eat every meal in there? Bring a phone in? The bathroom was right across the

hall, so that wasn't a problem. There was even a door that closed off her part of the hallway, so if she closed it, she could go back and forth to the bathroom without anyone seeing her. She could pretend it was her own private hotel room. How fantastic it would be to live in a hotel. She'd have room service three times a day, new sheets every night, and every morning she could snap the paper ribbon around the toilet seat, *Sanitized for Your Protection*.

Patty dusted her blue shoebox stereo speakers with a Kleenex. She loved saying *stereo speakers*. She had graduated from a kid's record player to a real stereo on her twelfth birthday. It wasn't a great stereo, of course. Not like Dad's or the one downstairs, but it had two speakers, and it was *hers*. Nobody else could touch it. And now John and Paul's voices came from one side of the room and Ringo's drums from the other side, and if she closed her eyes and sat in the beanbag chair, it was like they were all in the room with her, singing just for her. When Paul sang, *Love has a nasty habit of disappearing overnight*, well, it was obvious he knew all about her parents getting a divorce, and wanted her to know he cared. He knew that rotten feeling deep down when you learn that life doesn't really go the way it's supposed to go. But it was John who really understood everything about her life. He didn't even have to explain. It was all there in his voice, when he sang, *that boy won't be happy 'til he sees you cry*, the whole world stopped on the word *cry*, like nobody even knew what crying was until he sang it that way. John knew every part of Patty, even the ugly parts where she hated all the jocks at school and imagined pushing them in front of the school bus. And she knew she wasn't supposed to hate anyone, because love is all you need, right? But John's father had left him when he was a baby, and his mother got hit by a car and died when he was just a little older than

Patty, and she could hear it all, how the love and the hate fought inside that voice. Some people said he was a jerk because he wrote that song, *I'd rather see you dead little girl, than to be with another man*, but she knew what he really meant. Sometimes when you love somebody so much, you hate them, too. Because it scares you, loving anyone that much. You never know what they're going to do – stop loving you, leave you, die. If she met John, they wouldn't even have to speak, she was sure of it. They could just sit down together and have a whole conversation without words.

A loud knocking broke into *In My Life* right in the middle of the George Martin harpsichord solo. David was yelling outside the door.

Patty yanked the door open. “What the hell do you want?”

“What'd you have the door locked for, stupid? Like anybody cares what you do in here.”

“I repeat. What the hell do you want?”

“Mom's going out again tonight, she wants to know what we want for dinner, Kraft macaroni and cheese or TV dinners. What's that weird-looking thing on your desk?”

“TV dinners. But only if I can get the fried chicken. That turkey one really sucked last time. It's a Zakalob.”

“A what?”

“A Zakalob. We're supposed to make an imaginary creature out of stuff we find around the house – we can use whatever we want – glue, paper, old cans, milk cartons, but it can't be a drawing. And then we write a one-page story about it. It's for creative writing class tomorrow.”

David walked over to the imaginary creature and lifted it. Its body was a family-size glass coke bottle, which Patty had spent an hour covering with silver and gold sequins, one by one, until her fingers were wrinkled with Elmer's glue. At the bottom it had some kind of rubbery feet -- or maybe tentacles -- stuck to it, made out of the fingers of some pink Playtex Living Gloves. Two Batman-style wings, made from cardboard and painted bright red were masking-taped on the back. Its eyes were two ping-pong balls with giant blue irises that Patty had struggled for half an hour to attach with a combination of Scotch tape and rubber cement. A yellow yarn pom-pom from the top of one of David's old Green Bay Packers ski caps was the hair, and the mouth was a bottle cap with red sequins glued inside. The creature's expression was a perpetual *Oh* of surprise, like he'd just fallen out of his spaceship and couldn't believe where he'd landed.

"Did you ask Mom if you could cut up her rubber gloves?"

"What do *you* care?"

David turned the creature over in his hands, felt its weight. He seemed to be trying to think of something snotty to say, but not coming up with anything good.

"So, what did you call him, again?"

"A Zakalob. They're creatures from the planet Zaka. It's in a different solar system where you don't need air to breathe, and its okay to have only one foot on the bottom. They use these toes like an octopus to get around, see?" Patty scooted the Zakalob along the desktop, the pink toes diddling underneath.

"An octopus *swims*."

"Duh. You know what I mean."

“And is this the story that goes with it?” David picked up Patty’s homework, the third draft. He scrutinized for a moment, then read it out loud.

*“The Zakalob comes from the planet Zaka in the Antares nebula. The planet has stronger gravety than earth, -- You spelled gravity wrong – and their atmosphere is mostly tear gas, so people can’t go.”*

David looked up. “Tear gas?”

“I tried to make it something you really can’t breathe, no matter what. It was the best thing I could think of. Does it sound weird?” Of course, they both remembered when they were little, riding in the car downtown, back when the student protests were happening every day, and Dad and Mom would yell, “Kids! Tear gas!” Which meant roll up the windows and lie down on the floor of the car, fast, and no back-talk. It smelled like rotten eggs and floor cleaner.

“It’s weird. But not too weird.”

David continued reading, just like it was his own composition, and it was him in front of the class. His voice shifted to deeper, slower. She couldn’t tell if he was being serious for a joke, or serious for real.

*“The Zakalob can fly when he needs to escape his enemy, the Flarok, which is a kind of lizard monkey with very sharp teeth. The Zakalob civilization is mostly peaceful, except for that. Their solar system has two suns, and depending on which one is in the sky they can turn themselves either pink or blue. At night, they are see-through.”*

David stopped reading, but kept looking at the paper. Patty almost wanted him to hurry up and say something mean, just to get it over with, instead of thinking so long about it first.

“So, why do they turn different colors? Is it because, like, one sun is stronger than the other one, and it’s like a kind of protection from the radiation?”

Patty looked into David’s eyes to but there was no sarcastic squint. It seemed like he really wanted to know.

“Yeah...yeah, exactly.”

Patty hadn’t thought of the word *radiation*. She would have to add a new sentence to the paper. As soon as David left.

David set the Zakalob down on the desk softly, so it hardly made a noise. He turned it all the way around once, like it was doing a pirouette. The bat wings fluttered.

“Cool. I bet you get an A.”

He turned to go. “I’ll tell Mom you want the fried chicken TV dinner.”

“With corn, not peas.”

“I know.” David shut the door behind him without slamming.

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Patty couldn’t sleep. The imaginary creature projects were due the next day, and David had said she would probably get an A. Patty tried to remember the last time she got an A in anything, except for art class. This was sort of half art, anyway, so maybe it

didn't count, but she had a feeling about it. A feeling that she had come up with something good this time, something that not even David could make fun of. Passing cars made darts of light orbit around her bedroom. She could hear the Keller brothers from across the street dribbling a basketball in the street, a cat yowling from far away. The Zakalob was next to the stereo, facing the window to the street, as if looking out, waiting for his space ship to come get him. He was just a silhouette in the dark, the outline of his bat-wings just barely visible against the wall. Patty imagined herself in front of the class, telling the whole story of the planet Zaka, how the fish there swim in the air instead of the water, and some of them have fifteen eyes. How the Zakalobs are planning an invasion of Earth, but not to do anything dangerous, just to get chocolate, because their planet doesn't have any. They'd probably all just attack the Hershey's factory in Pennsylvania, which Patty had actually seen once when they all went to visit their other grandmother at Christmastime. On the way, they had driven through Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, to see the beautiful light display, the Marys and Josephs with the animals, and all the street decorations, which Dad said were the best in the state because Bethlehem was where Jesus was born. Patty was born only a few miles from there. It was exciting to be from the same state as Jesus, until she bragged about it to her second grade class and got teased about it for the next six months.

As these thoughts were passing through her head, the Zakalob on her bookshelf looked almost alive, as if the wings might start fluttering and take him up into the air at any moment.

And something *was* starting to happen, now that she was really looking. A yellow glow kindled in the bottom of the bottle, right above the pink rubber toes. The light inside

was misty at first, then grew brighter, yellower, until the entire bottle lit up from inside illuminating the whole back corner of the room. The stereo speakers shot looming, black shadows on the wall. The bat wings suddenly looked twice as big, their shadows spreading behind the Zakalob, who was now glowing white, impossibly bright, a ball of light growing around him, the sequins dazzling in the middle of it. It looked like he was about to explode, or catch fire.

Patty's heart hammered up in her throat. She threw off the blankets and ran out of the room and down the hall. *Where? Mom's room? No. She's still out.* She pounded on David's door.

"David open the door, *please!*"

Patty jumped from one foot to the other. The floor suddenly felt very cold and she had to pee. Her bedroom door was still open at the end of the hall, but when she looked back, she couldn't see the weird light anymore. Jinx heard the commotion and trotted up the stairs, sniffing the air before him as he came around the corner towards her. Patty reached out for him and he came to her, and licked her nose as she buried her hands in his fur. She was grateful for the warmth of him. His doggy smell. David opened the door, squinting at the sight of his little sister crouching on the floor in her pajamas, hugging the dog.

"What's going on? Is something wrong with Jinx?"

Patty hugged the dog tighter and tried to stop shaking. Jinx licked the side of her face and whined softly. "The Zakalob, I think it's alive."

"What?" David had that sound in his voice like he was about to start yelling. He hated being woken up.

Patty tried to tell him what had just happened, but it was as if she'd forgotten how to talk. "It's all lit up, or it did light up. Light...lighting...like a flashlight, only brighter! Can I sleep in your room tonight?"

"No way! Are you crazy? You had a dream!"

"It was *not* a dream! How could it be a dream if I wasn't asleep?"

David rubbed his face. He had the mad wrinkle in his forehead that *meant watch out, somebody's going to be sorry*.

"This is like those noises in the attic that nobody hears but you, right? Can't you figure it out? News flash, Patty: You're *dreaming* -- get it?" David waved his hand in front of Patty's face like she was a victim of a bad hypnotism. She batted his hand away.

"What about now? Am I dreaming *now*? Are you a dream, too? You must be, 'cause I didn't wake up! You standing her telling me it was a dream -- is this a dream, too? Because the Zakalob glowing was just as real as this, and I *wasn't* asleep! I wasn't even *close*! Come look at it with me, I'll show you."

David bit his lip until it turned into a white line. His hands made fists. Patty waited. He cursed and stumbled back into his room and pulled a t-shirt on over his flannel pajama bottoms and followed Patty to her bedroom. Jinx trailed after them, toenails clicking on the hardwood floor.

"Why is it always so damn cold in your room?" David turned on the light. The Zakalob was on the bookshelf, looking completely normal, as if nothing at all had happened.

"Okay, you satisfied?" David stood there with his arms crossed.

Patty hadn't really expected it to still be glowing. Somehow, she knew that only she was supposed to see it. But it was no use trying to explain any of that to David. Anything else she said now would just make him madder.

David waited for her to say something, then sighed loudly, walked over and picked up the Zakalob and showed it to Patty.

"See? It's just like it was. Nothing funny about it at all. And no, you can't sleep in my room, you stupid little freak."

Patty felt suddenly like she was going to cry. She was way too old to cry. Too old to be waking her brother up in the middle of the night because of things lighting up for no reason. Too old to care that her brother called her a stupid little freak.

"But," David said, with a softer voice, but he was looking at the Zakalob, not at Patty. "I'll let the Zakalob sleep in my room. That way he won't bother you any more tonight."

Patty thought about it. She didn't have much choice. If it lit up again, she would never get to sleep, and who knew when Mom was coming home?

"Will you be careful with it?"

"I'm not gonna play with it, if that's what you mean. It's going on my dresser and then I'm going to sleep, and you're going to shut up for the rest of the night, if you can handle that. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Oh, and I found that little blue glass bird you guys were going crazy over. You put it in the jar with Jinx's pills from the vet, you moron."

Patty opened her mouth to protest that she hadn't done it, but what was the use? David wouldn't believe her. She just watched as he shut the door behind him.

"Thanks, Ghost Lady," she said to the empty hallway.

## Chapter Eight

Sarah was a pretty good dancer, for a ten-year-old, actually. Patty found out when they started coming over to each other's houses after school, before their moms came home, so they could play the stereo as loud as they wanted, whoever's house they were in. Usually they were at Sarah's. Before long, Sarah knew every word to every Beatles song Patty played. They would act out the parts together, Patty singing John's parts and Sarah singing Paul's parts. They used Sarah's mom's hair brushes for microphones and shook their hair in front of Sarah's bedroom mirror on the screaming parts.

It was a long time before Patty would invite Sarah over when Gloria was home. She asked Gloria about a dozen times if it was okay, until Gloria finally told her to quit asking.

"Listen, it's not a problem, okay. She can't help being that backstabbing bitch's kid, can she? It's not her fault. I've got nothing against *her*."

"But you're not gonna call her mom a backstabbing bitch when she's *here*, are you? Because I don't think she even *knows* her mom's a backstabbing bitch. So if you *say* anything--"

“For the last time, just invite her over, will you, for Christ sake? I will be nothing but nice to her, I promise. Why on earth would I talk about her mother in front of her? Where did you learn to be so paranoid?” Apparently there were a lot of complex rules about what to say about who in front of whom, and Patty had a lot to learn about how it all worked.

That was the year that Gloria was listening to Helen Reddy singing *I am Woman, Hear me Roar*. She and all her other single friends would sit around the living room, talking about women’s rights, smoking a million cigarettes and listening to that album over and over.

“What does it mean, ‘hear me roar’? it sounds weird,” Patty said.

“It means women are powerful, sweetie. We can do anything.” Gloria let out a stream of cigarette smoke and folded her legs into a guru position. She was wearing one of her Hawaiian mu-mus, with giant yellow orchids on a blue field. Her divorced friends Eileen and Louise were on either side of her, helping themselves to a plate of deviled eggs, cheddar cheese, and Ritz crackers. Her youngest friend, Jessica had her long legs stretched out in front of her, clad in bright orange tights. She wasn’t even married, yet. She had long, wavy, copper-colored hair and a soft southern accent, because she had grown up in Georgia. Jessica was probably the most beautiful woman Patty knew in person. She was almost twenty years younger than Gloria, but it didn’t seem to bother either of them.

The big, round coffee table had been cleared to make room for a pitcher of gimlets. Patty could tell because of the special tall, frosted glasses that Gloria wouldn’t let her use because they were only for gimlets.

“Women can do anything? You mean, like, *‘bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan? And never let you forget you’re a man?’*” Patty did the little dance that went with the song, swinging her hips and twirling the imaginary frying pan, the way she and David did whenever that commercial came on. Patty never could remember what the commercial was for. Some perfume or something. Everybody laughed.

“All except for the man part!” said Gloria’s friend, Louise, raising her glass. Everyone else cheered and raised theirs.

“Right on! Screw ‘em!” Gloria said, her voice banging off the ceiling.

“We don’t need the bastards!” said Jessica, taking a loud sip from the special glass.

If only Gloria could always be this way. Strong, funny, not afraid of anything. Maybe her friends even believed she was really like that. That being divorced didn’t bother her, that she never wandered around in middle of the night, talking to herself. That she never woke up Patty to sit on the edge of her bed to talk about Dad and cry. There were nights she said Dad’s name over and over again, all her words mushing together like smeared ink on a page. Nothing she said ever made any sense at those times. It was all, look what he did to me, how could he do it, and I just want him back, and I can’t go on. And no matter how hard she tried, Patty hadn’t yet figured out the words to change it, to make her feel better.

What would it be like to get married? Patty tried to imagine anyone ever loving her enough to want to spend the rest of his life with her. But it all seemed like a fantasy, like a little girl’s game that you played when you got sick of your Barbie dolls. I’ll be the bride and you be the groom. Get married, get divorced. Then suddenly all alone, having

to work and pay all the bills with kids to take care of. Would she be able to do it? Would she cry to herself at night, asking why, why, why in an empty stairwell? One way or another, she was pretty sure she wouldn't feel like roaring.

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David was giving her that look, that look that said why are you bothering me with your crazy talk again?

“You watch *way* too many horror movies, Patty.”

“But I heard footsteps, I swear.”

“If anyone broke in here, Jinx would be barking like crazy. Think about it.”

“I'm not *saying* somebody broke in.”

“Well, then what *are* you saying?”

“Forget it – never mind!” And Patty went to her room.

The door between Gloria's room and Patty's room was the only one upstairs that had no lock on it. There never had been one. Why the door was even there was a complete mystery. As if she needed easy access to her mother's bedroom and vice-versa. If anything, she wished the walls were thicker. Patty had shoved her yellow bean bag chair up against the door and taped the giant poster of Jimi Hendrix over it. The poster was just the right size for the door, and Jimi was a powerful guard, armed with his bright red Fender electric guitar, making sure nothing evil got into the room.

The door led not just to Gloria's room, but also to another door, only a couple of inches away. The door to the attic. Patty had tried every key on the giant, Dracula key ring for the key that fit the attic door. She did finally find the key and get the door locked, but it was tricky. Once it was locked, it was hard to get it open again. One time Gloria

needed something in the there, some sweaters she'd packed up over the summer, and she couldn't get the door open. She'd yelled at Patty for locking the attic door for no reason, took the key off the ring and hid it, and forgotten where she'd put it. Now nobody could lock the attic door.

The sounds in the attic happened after midnight. Sounds like soft footsteps wandering around right over Patty's head. Footsteps that didn't make the floorboards creak, which was weird, because they creaked even under Patty's feet, and she was only eighty-five pounds. Airy, swishy sounds on the attic stairs that were impossible to figure out. Like soft things falling -- pillows, slippers, bundles of grass. Sometimes she could hear the attic door creak open slowly, just a tiny crack, and then close again.

But so far, Jimi Hendrix seemed to be keeping it out of Patty's room. Keeping *her* out, the Ghost Lady.

The footsteps would start from the east side of the attic and move to the west. They didn't usually go back the other way. They would start softly and get louder as they got closer to the spot right over Patty's room, and then just stop. That was the worst part. Stop why? Stop for what? And how did they get back to the other side later without making a noise? The footsteps usually stopped right about the place the stairs would be. The stairs back down to the house. The stairs that ended right outside the door to Gloria's room, and the beanbag chair was hardly enough to keep *it* out, whatever *it* was. But Jimi Hendrix was already dead, so he had nothing to be afraid of, even other people who were dead.

But in the daytime, the attic was okay, at least until it got really hot, then it was hard to breathe in there. But there were two little windows to let in light, and it was quiet, and a good place to get away from everybody.

One morning, Patty went to investigate. Up the steep little wooden stairs that passed through a open rectangle in the attic floor. As her head emerged, she looked all around. Nothing out of place. Just the stuffy silence under the high, peaked roof and the dusty, naked wood smell. The floor was piled with boxes of things from their old house that they had never unpacked. In the far corners were boxes of things left over from the family that had lived there before – Bob and Ida’s. Strange things like dishes with pictures of the Grand Canyon on them. Old curtains that were so faded it was hard to tell what color they had been. A baby’s broken cradle.

That baby was probably grown up and had a job by now, Patty thought, as she looked inside the boxes, somebody else’s things, all mixed up with theirs. Why had Bob and Ida left it all? She found bowling trophies, copper-bottomed drinking glasses with pictures of pheasants on them, a whole collection of little gingerbread houses made out of porcelain, way too many of them. Patty thought about throwing it all away, but something stopped her. Anyway, they weren’t hers to throw away.

She pulled the no-color curtains out of the big box behind the stairway opening. They still had the little drapery hooks attached to the top ruffle. She held them up against a roof beam and pretended to be looking out of them. She tried to imagine what room they had been in. It seemed like they belonged to the living room. Then she had an idea. She took a coil of clothesline hanging from a nail, and strung it from one ceiling beam to another, six feet apart. She pulled the line tight and tied it around the other roof beam.

Then she slipped each drapery hook over the clothes line until both curtains were hung. They seemed a little shapeless, hanging in the air like that, so she found a couple of ribbons from the Christmas box and gathered each curtain together, so they looked like they were pulled back, letting in the sunlight. A curtain for a window that didn't exist. It was like the set for a strange play. Patty liked the idea of that, and began adding more things to the set. The old rocking chair that didn't go with the furniture in the living room. A little side table that had been theirs, she supposed. She set the rocking chair next to the curtain, so it looked out the window that didn't exist, and sat down in it. It was perfect. She now had a tiny sitting room with no walls, and a curtain with no window, for nobody. She pulled the side table closer to the rocker. After a while, it began to feel lonely in there, and she lost interest in the project and went back downstairs to listen to her records.

It wasn't until a week or two later that Patty heard the footsteps again. She pulled the covers up to her chin and braced herself. But this time they didn't come across to her side. They were staying on the east side of the attic, walking around in little circles. Bumping softly, shuffling, making little scrapes and thuds. But at least they weren't coming over to the stairs. Patty rolled over and tried to shut the sounds out. She was getting pretty good at shutting things out.

That is, until Gloria went upstairs one day to get the winter coats out.

“What the hell have you been *doing* up there? There's, like, a whole little *room* set up on the far end. Is that supposed to be some kind of joke?” Gloria was standing in the doorway of Patty's room with her hands on her hips. It was obvious she wasn't going to go away until she got some sort of explanation.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You follow me, and I’ll show you what I’m talking about.”

Patty went upstairs with Gloria, and Gloria showed it to her. The curtains, rocking chair and side table, set at just the right place to put a cup of tea, maybe some knitting. Then Patty noticed the things she hadn’t put there. For instance, the bowling trophy that was sitting on the tiny sill of the *real* window. An old lamp from the corner was now on the side table, its cord lying useless on the floor. A tiny round rug Patty had never seen before was laid out in front of the rocking chair, making it look more like a little room than ever.

“I swear, Mom. All I did was put the curtains up, and... the chair and table.”

“Well, I know where you got the table and chair, but what about the other stuff? I don’t recognize that lamp...”

“It was theirs.”

“Theirs who?”

“Bob and Ida’s.”

Gloria sighed an aggravated sigh and sat down in the rocking chair. A little cloud of dust swirled up into the beam of autumn light streaming in through the window.

“Why did you *do* it, Patty? It’s so weird-looking. It gives me the creeps.”

Patty thought about it for a long time. “I don’t know. I don’t even know why I did it. It feels like so long ago now, I can’t remember what I was thinking.”

But the truth was, the noises in the attic were staying in one place now. They had stopped coming over to Patty’s side. Now they stayed over on Gloria’s side. Why was it Gloria never heard the footsteps at night?

Gloria got up to take the curtains down from the clothesline.

“No,” said Patty, a little too quickly. “It’s okay, Mom. I’ll do it.”

Gloria looked at her, as if trying to decide what to do.

“Thank you,” she said, finally, and picking up the sweater box, she descended the stairs, mumbling something about her children giving her heart attacks.

Patty sat down in the rocking chair and thought for a long time. *Had* she known what she was doing when she set up the little stage-set room? She tried to remember.

In a way, she had been taking a private journey back to being a little kid again. It had been like playing house, only she’d never been into playing house when she was little. Somebody always wanted to bring a doll into it and be the mommy, and then it got totally boring. She hadn’t actually been thinking to set it up as a home for the ghost - to keep it in its place, safely behind doors. Had she?

Patty trailed patterns in the dust on the end table, kicked at the lamp cord, plugged into nothing. How had it gotten there? Had David done it? Maybe it didn’t matter. The point was, the little room was working. It had to stay this way. Gloria was done with her attic errand for the season – she wouldn’t be coming back up for months. Patty made a tiny adjustment to the curtain on the clothes line, stood back to examine it, then went back to her room, closing both doors behind her.

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“How come you never bring your friends home from school?” Gloria was stirring gravy in a saucepan. She had been watching the portable TV on the kitchen counter, Dan Rather doing the evening news, but now it was just a Tide commercial.

Patty examined a fingernail. “ I don’t know.”

“Whatever happened to that girl who never washed her hair?”

“Heidi? You didn’t like her, remember?”

“Well, she smelled. But I thought she was your friend. I don’t even know who your friends *are* anymore.”

Patty wanted to say I’m sorry, but she wasn’t sure what she was sorry for. Every day, lately, she woke up with her throat tight, her stomach like a balled fist, just thinking about getting on the bus, walking into the school, down the hallways, under a hail of *Hey dog! Hey retard! And Look who got hit with the ugly stick!* Of course, now she had people to eat with in the lunch room, and that was progress, but the hallways were still a war zone. It didn’t matter what she did – she’d tried ignoring them, making smart remarks, making faces, the jocks would not lay off.

“Well, basically, kids at school don’t like me, Mom. They make fun of me.”

“You keep saying that, but I mean, why? What do they say to you?”

“They call me stupid and ugly.”

“That’s ridiculous – you’re one of the smartest children I know. Both you and your brother. I did *not* give birth to stupid children.” Gloria wiped her hands on a dish towel. Patty noticed how she didn’t say anything contradicting the ugly part.

“I just can’t believe that, Patty,” she went on. “Are you sure that’s what they’re saying?”

“Mom -- I’m in the slow math class; I’m like, totally surrounded by retards. So yeah, they call me stupid.”

“Don’t say retards. And if you would just pay attention in class, you would get better grades. You daydream all the time, that’s the problem. I remember back when you were in second grade, your father and I went to a parent-teacher conference and we talked about your report card – why you were doing so badly in school. They thought you were deaf at first, remember? And then that teacher had the balls to say, ‘Maybe she just isn’t as bright as the other children.’ Well, I gave that bitch a piece of my mind.”

Gloria was always giving some bitch a piece of her mind. Jinx whined at the back door and wiggled to be let out.

“David,” Gloria yelled over the TV in the next room, “Go tie Jinx up in the backyard -- he’s driving me bonkers!”

Gloria turned the burner off under the gravy and checked the Brussels sprouts in the steamer. “But, sweetie, you *do* daydream too much, and you’ve *got* to start standing up straight.”

David shuffled into kitchen to let the dog out.

“You two both cripples or what? Why do *I* have to tie him up?”

“Because you haven’t gotten off your lazy ass since you got home from school! Don’t you have any homework? And don’t say cripples!” But David was already gone with the dog, slamming the door behind him.

On TV was a commercial for Pepsodent toothpaste. A woman was dancing around her apartment smiling into every mirror, making kiss noises. A man came to the

door and they fell into each other arms, singing *Pepsodent gives you sex appeal*. Sex appeal. It sounded like something slimy that you might slip and fall into.

The commercials ended. The news came back on. Gloria mashed potatoes and went back to talking to Dan Rather. Patty slipped out into the back yard. David had left Jinx tied up and disappeared across the street. She tossed a stick, and the dog leapt after it, plunging in and out of the currant bushes, tongue lolling. They raced around the yard, playing tug-of-war. Jinx lowered his head and gripped the stick in his teeth, flecks of bark studding his pink tongue. He put his ears back and growled way down in his throat, not really meaning it, but when Patty looked into his dark canine eyes, there was a green glow deep inside them that said he could mean it if he wanted to. Inside everyone there was that light, and you had to be careful. Because you never knew when it might flare up into life. You never knew when the teeth might show.

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Patty wasn't sure if it was a dream that woke her up, but something pounded over her head. She sat up in bed and listened, but the room was silent. She looked at the clock radio. It was three-forty am. Something scraped and dragged over her head, from the attic. Then thudding, pounding. Patty drew her knees up to her chin and wrapped the sheet tighter around her. Why didn't David ever wake up when this happened? Why didn't Jinx bark? Why was it always her? Then she heard a sound she'd never heard before. The non-creaking footsteps, pat, pat, pat, put, pat, this time they didn't stop at the stairs. They came right down. In the attic stairwell the flat steps made a hollow echo, going from pat, pat, to pock, pock, pock. Patty began praying, not even knowing who she was praying to. Jesus? God? Jimi Hendrix?

*Don't let it come in here, please, please don't let it come in...*

Then came the voice.

At first, she almost wondered if it was Gloria, it sounded so much like the way she whimpered and wept to herself late at night -- muttering, high-pitched, fretting, breathy. But it was as if it were coming from a great distance. She remembered the funny little speaking tube in her grandmother's house. A hole in the wall that you could speak through and talk to somebody upstairs, if you didn't want to come down. She and David had always played with it when they went to visit -- David with his mouth pressed against the one end of the tube, singing her the *Popeye the Sailor Man* song with the dirty lyrics he'd learned at school. Patty with her ear pressed against the other end of the tube, laughing. The voice was almost like that, flattened and squeezed from far, far away. She couldn't make out any words. It was almost like a different language. It made a vibration as it came, buzzing through her, like electricity. Then it was gone.

She didn't know how long the footsteps, the banging and thumping went on. Time never moved the same way when it was happening, and she kept the sheet over her head the whole time. Finally, after what seemed like hours, she began to hear birds singing outside. She pulled the covers away from her eyes. The sky outside was a pinkish indigo, and the house was silent. Silent in that most silent way, when the night is over, and morning hasn't begun yet.

She stepped out of bed and down the hall, looking around. Nothing was out of place. She pushed open the door to Gloria's room, passing through the familiar smell of ashtrays and Jean Naté, the warm human smell in the room. She took a deep breath, turned the attic doorknob, and opened it.

Everything on the stairs looked normal. The first morning sunlight shining in a beam through the little window on the east end, cutting through the dark at the top of the stairs. The sun beam gave her courage, and she climbed, gripping the handrail hard.

The first thing she noticed were the papers scattered across the floor at the top of the stairs. News clippings, old bills, postcards. Then she saw the rest of it.

Every box in the attic had been opened. The contents spilled out, things strewn across the floor. The broken cradle was on the other side of the room along with a baby booster seat she had never seen before. The two of them sitting side by side--

As part of a circle. A circle of objects.

Assembled in the center of the floor - an old coffee pot, a doll with a broken arm, a blue vase, an embroidered throw pillow, the bowling trophy again -- all arranged in the spot where the rocking chair and end table had been. What had happened to the table and chair? Where were the curtains she'd hung on the clothesline? The whole little room was gone -- taken apart.

Someone had taken the room apart, and they shouldn't have. Patty rushed to pick up the scattered things and put them back in the boxes. She'd have to be quiet and quick, so as to get it all done before Gloria woke up. Had she really slept through all that racket all night? She would have to find everything, and put it all back the way it was.

She boxed away the baby things first. They were the creepiest. Why would anybody want the baby stuff, anyway? There was no baby ghost, was there?

"There better not be..." Patty muttered to herself. She was starting to sound like a ghost herself. When everything was back in the boxes, she reassembled the little room, re-hanging the curtains last. By the time she was finished, she was sweaty and covered

with cobwebs and dust. She was aching to get out of there, take a shower, eat some breakfast. She stopped at the foot of the stairs and turned around one last time to inspect her work.

“Okay, Jesus, this is me, okay?” she said to the attic beams. “Remember when my stupid born-again Christian friend Brenda made me get down on my knees in the girls bathroom in fifth grade and accept you as my personal savior? Well, I don’t actually know what a personal savior does, but you know I’ve never had anything against you. I’ve always thought you were a great guy, even if my parents don’t believe in you. So if you’re there, Jesus, and if you can do *anything*, please make this Ghost Lady happy. Please don’t let her come downstairs. I really, really, *really* don’t want to see her, okay? And I don’t know if this is the kind of stuff you do, but she’s just a lady. She’s not like a monster or anything. So it shouldn’t be too hard, right? And I’m sorry if that’s not what you’re supposed to ask your personal savior to do, but I never needed your help until now, so if it’s okay, please help. Amen, okay?”

She closed the door softly behind her.

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The next day after school, she talked to Johann about it.

They were sitting by the creek that ran across the street from his house. Down in the ravine, where they couldn’t be seen from the street. The trees above were dropping their leaves; brown, gold and rusty red, into the slow, slipping water.

“So, you know the Ghost Lady? In my house? The one you asked about?” Patty said.

Johann threw a twig into the water and watched it float away.

“Yah, is she causing trouble?”

“Yep. In the attic.”

He looked at her. The birds went quiet. Everything around them was still. Everything but the water.

“What’s she doing?”

“Well, I set up, like, a sitting place for her in the attic. A place for her to stay and hang out, and hopefully not make any trouble, but my Mom didn’t like it. She must have taken it apart yesterday, and the Ghost Lady got upset, and totally wrecked the place.” She told him everything that had happened in the past three nights. Johann’s eyes lit up when she told him about the voice she’d heard on the attic stairs.

“What did it sound like?”

Patty wasn’t sure how to put it into words. The voice had been a *physical* experience, not just a hearing experience. It was a thing that needed a different language to describe, a language of sounds and pictures, maybe. Maybe without words at all. She remembered drawing the trapezoids for the kids, over and over. *...See? Look. The two lines of the triangle are headed for each other. They’re about to connect. But then, look, here comes a line that crosses them, just as they’re about to meet. It cuts them off. Makes sure they never connect, cuts them off before they get to touch, see?*

That was so much easier, when she could draw it. Sometimes words were where the lines get cut off.

Johann stripped the bark from a twig, exposing the cool, pale flesh underneath. He put it against his lips, waiting for her to respond.

“It wasn’t in English. But not really a foreign language, either. It was like I was *feeling it* – not just hearing it.”

“Like it was cutting through your body?”

“Yes! That’s it – exactly!”

Johann stood up on the rock he’d been sitting on. “I remember that. From the ghost we had back home. It’s totally freaky – when they talk. You can feel it in your stomach.”

“Yeah! And then there were all these bumping and banging and dragging noises all night long in the attic, and I couldn’t sleep all night.”

“Maybe she was bumping into things because the furniture in the attic was moved. They can’t see normally, you know. Ghosts.”

“Really?”

“Some of them can only see what was there before. In the past. Like the ghost in our house back home, he used to try to push me out of bed at night. But that was only because the bedroom used to be his. He didn’t hate me or anything, I was just in his way. He couldn’t see that there was a whole new family there now. He could only see *his* house. They way it used to be.”

Of course, it was reasonable. Except there had only been one family in the house before the Lofthauses. Bob and Ida were still alive, and so were their children and grandchildren.

So, who *was* she?

Johann jumped down from the rock and into the creek, splashing water and mud on both of them.

“Hey, stop!” Patty stood up, wiping the grit off her t-shirt. “I just wish I could figure out who she is. And what she wants.”

“It may be best to just get rid of her. I’m sure we can invent our own banishing ritual. We can find some herbs from around the creek here to burn. Make our own *muti*.”

“I don’t know. I have a feeling she isn’t really bad. How can I ask her to leave when I don’t even know who she is? Maybe she’s trying to tell us something important.”

Johann shook his head. “She’s only there because she’s stuck. When people die with only one thought in their minds, that thought takes over their spirit when they die. For some reason, her one thought left her stuck in your house. But she doesn’t belong there. She belongs in the spirit world, or in heaven, or wherever they go when they leave earth.”

Patty picked up a stick and threw it in the creek. For some reason, Johann made it seem more satisfying when he did it.

“Just let me think about it first, okay?” she said.

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Turned out it was David who had done it. Dismantled the little room.

“I couldn’t find my electric train set. It ended up being in the basement, anyway. But that whole setup you had up there was so gay, I had to take it down. What were you doing? Having tea parties up there or something?”

“None of your business! And leave my stuff alone. I don’t mess with *your* stuff.”

“Unless you’re stealing my ball clacker.”

“We’re not talking about that anymore!”

“Oh, sensitive subject is it? Fine, don’t admit it. If you want to have your retarded little playhouse in the attic, go right ahead. Baby.”

“I’m not the one still playing with electric train sets!”

“It’s a *collector’s item*, dimwit.”

There was no way she was even going to try to talk to him about the Ghost Lady now. He’d never believe her, so what did it matter? It took a long time to fall asleep that night, with all kinds of questions in her head. What if she’d put the chair in the wrong place? Packed a box wrong? It was all a big guessing game.

But that night, things were quiet in the attic. And the next night, and the night after that. In fact, for the whole next week, Patty heard no noises, no voices, and slept through the nights with no problem.

## Chapter Nine

A chorus line of muppets flailed their heads from side to side in time with a song about the letter R. Patty was watching, but not really watching. She only liked Sesame Street for the cartoons. She knew she was too old for it. But she liked watching the animals pushing letters and numbers across empty landscapes, pushing words together, growing wings and flying away. It gave her a weird, lonely feeling. And it didn’t have

commercials, that was the other good thing. Just a break in the middle for something called In The News. That was for the bigger kids, like her. They explained world events, and it was usually pretty good. David walked in while the announcer guy was talking about some new bunch of soldiers with guns blowing things up somewhere in the Middle East.

“Shi-ite, Shi-ite, Shi-ite, Shi-ite,” Patty repeated, trying to get the sound of the new word right.

“What’s your problem? You sound like a moron.” said David. He was drinking out of the carton of milk.

“I’m just practicing -- Jesus! What’s wrong with practicing?”

“You don’t even know what a Shiite is.”

“So? Do you?”

“Sure,” he said, tossing his hair back. “It’s another kind of Muslim. Not like the regular kind. If you just listen to the guy instead of babbling while he’s talking, you’d know. Dummy.” David walked into the kitchen to pour the cereal.

“Shi-ite, Shi-ite,” Patty said it more quietly. She liked the feel of the word, how you had to make it stop in the middle with the back of your throat. The cartoon map of the Middle East showed little cartoon silhouettes of guys with guns popping up all over the place. She couldn’t help it, but they looked kind of cool.

“Hey kids, it’s a beautiful day, and I want you to get off your butts and out of the house!” Gloria yelled from the living room.

“As soon as this is over,” yelled David, returning with a bowl of Rice Krispies, milk sloshing over the edge. “It’s educational.”

*“Everything’s educational these days! You know what’s educational? Getting your butt out of the house!”*

Patty wanted to hear more about the Shiites and their guns, but she wanted to get away from her mother more. She slid off the couch, ran to the kitchen to grab a pickle out of the jar in the fridge, and headed out the back door.

The park across the street was empty, too early in the morning for most kids. Kids whose moms hadn’t kicked them out of the house yet. Patty walked over to her favorite pine tree. A huge blue spruce that stood a little way from the basketball hoops, taller than all the telephone poles. The wind made a sighing sound through its needles and thick branches. Its boughs seemed to wave hello at Patty as she approached, inviting her to climb. The tree knew her. Knew her better than any other kid on the block, because she was the only one who knew how to climb it. Patty stood next to the huge trunk, crunched on the pickle and looked up through the spokes of spiraling branches, into the towering blue-green tent of the tree, where the shade was cool, clinging to the last of the nighttime air. She wiped her hands on her pants and leapt as high as she could, grabbing the lowest branch. The brown, soft bark flaked away under her hands as she hoisted herself up and pulled herself up from branch to branch. It wasn’t something everyone could do. Sarah never made it past the second level, even though she was smaller than Patty, even. She was too scared of the way the branches bent and bowed under them. She whined when the needles scratched against her cheeks. Patty didn’t mind any of this, because the view from the top was so worth it.

A half-dead branch snapped under her left foot, and Patty’s left leg dropped dangled in mid-air, but she found another foothold and kept climbing.

There was a point, just before the top, where the crown of the tree was just too dense and full of needles to climb anymore, and that's where Patty stopped. She sat and caught her breath, looking through the green boughs at the rooftops of the houses across the street. She could see across the railroad tracks, all the way to the cemetery. She was so high up that if she fell, she'd definitely break her leg, maybe even die. How long would it be before anybody found her? She wondered. She wished she could live in the tree, like a panther, watching the world from where nobody could see her, where nobody wanted anything from her.

*Ping, ping, ping.* The sound of a basketball on the pavement below. Patty peeked through the branches and saw the top of the heads of Larry Shultz and Eric Pitt. Heat prickled up her arms from the pit of her stomach. The same guys that had laughed at Johann last week, the same guys that had called her a dog every day of her life. What in the world were they doing here?

Patty tried to calm her pounding heart, telling herself there was no way they could see her in the top of the tree. She had the advantage. She was a panther, a silent, deadly predator, and the only reason she didn't drop down from the tree and rip their throats out with her teeth and claws was that she had just eaten breakfast and wasn't hungry.

*Ping, ping, ping.* "Hey, look!" Eric yelled, "I'm Kareem Abdul Jabbar!" Eric leapt, shot. Patty got a sick feeling in the back of her mouth to hear Eric say Jabbar's name. He was the best center the Milwaukee Bucks ever had in the history of eternity. Patty and David could quote everything about him from his shoe size to his rebound average. How could *they* like him, too? It was like they polluted his name just by saying

it. The rim banged and the ball flew off to the side. Larry laughed through his nose, *hyahh!* A sound like the buzzer when the contestant gets the wrong answer on Jeopardy.

“Jabbar doesn’t miss his jump shots, pussy!”

“Kiss my ass, man.”

Patty was a panther. A Shiite panther with a machine gun aimed at both Larry and Eric. The only reason she didn’t pull the trigger was because she wasn’t in the mood. She wanted to see Eric miss another jump shot.

The boys leapt in the air, fighting for the ball, swearing at each other, laughing, and Patty thought, this is what they’re like when nobody’s watching.

“Hey, I saw Tammy at the pool yesterday,” said Larry.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, and like, you should see her tits, man.”

“What about ‘em?”

“She was wearing this bikini, and...”

“Didja get a boner?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

Tammy? Tammy Schmidt? Queen turd of all the jocks? Tammy, who was always combing her perfectly blow-dried hair and flouncing it in front of Larry? She would always smile at him and giggle until he let her cut in line in front of him in the lunch room, and then she’d ignore him and talk to some other boy. Didn’t all the boys love Tammy Schmidt?

“I wonder who’s gonna be the first to get their hands on those tits?”

“I wonder who musta did it already!”

But if they all loved her, why were they talking that way about her? Why were they down there right now, shooting free throws and calling her a slut? Talking about the horrible things they'd like to do to her? Patty's heart was beating hard. She was almost starting to feel sorry for Tammy. Her legs were starting to go numb from crouching on the tree branch. It was hard to stay still. She had to remember she was a Shiite panther, (not like the regular kind) and that meant she had to be strong. As long as they didn't know she was up here, she was safe.

“Yeah, and I bet she has hair down there, too.”

“If we see her at the pool next week, we could, like, go under water and see. I could, like, swim up and grab her and pull down her bikini bottom.”

“And I'll be, like, under water taking notes, man. Getting a total boner.”

Patty had never realized before just how stupid they were. She aimed her Shiite gun at Larry's eyeball and fired. His whole head exploded like a watermelon and Eric screamed like a little girl. *Larry, oh Larry! It's a terrorist attack! Help! The terrorists killed Larry!* Patty swished her long black tail and aimed her gun at Eric...

A loud crack erupted under her as the branch gave way, and Patty dropped down to the sixth, fifth, fourth level of branches before she got a grip on one that would hold her. She scrambled herself onto her new perch and exhaled. Her legs and arms bloomed with little beads of blood along the scratches. Her heart banged in her throat.

“What the hell..?” Larry and Eric appeared under the tree and looked up. Close enough so Patty could see a pimple in the middle of Eric's forehead. She tightened herself into a crouching position, trying to make herself a smaller target.

“It's Lofthaus! I don't believe it!”

“What the fuck are you doing up there, you ugly little freak?”

“Playing Smoky the Bear? Huh? You some kinda retarded girl scout?”

Patty swallowed, gripping tighter around the trunk of the tree. Her toes curled around the branch under her.

“Get lost!” she said, but her voice came out squeaky.

They laughed their yappy laughs.

“Oh gee, we’re *sorry!* Are we in your *way?* Is this *your* park? Or just your *tree?*”

“Hey, Lar, feel like a little target practice?”

Eric passed Larry the ball. Patty ducked as the orange blur came crashing through the pine boughs at her head, but there was no room to get out of the way. It bounced hard off her temple and the boys roared. Larry picked it up from the ground and threw it at her again, hitting her on the shoulder.

“Hey, isn’t it against animal cruelty laws to hit a dog with a basketball?”

“Not on Saturday - that’s what I heard!” Eric leaned back and flung the ball with one hand. Patty deflected it from her face with her arms, but it hit hard, knocking her head back on her neck, causing her to lose balance. She teetered on the branch.

“Come on, let’s knock this monkey outta the tree, man!”

Larry picked up the ball and prepared to launch it again.

*Pong... pong.. pong.*

Another basketball on the pavement. It was David. Slowly dribbling his ball, his eyes narrowed at Eric and Larry. This was her chance. Patty let go and dropped. She’d never tried it from so high up before, but it was only two branches higher from where she normally jumped. Her feet hit the ground first, then her hands, onto the prickly pad of

brown pine needles below. All the air slammed out of her body, but she got up and ran, just missing one of Larry's kicking feet. She swung around behind David who didn't seem the least bit surprised to see his sister falling out of a tree. He was looking at Larry.

"Who're *you?*" said Eric, taking a step forward, chin thrust out. Then he then caught the look in David's eyes and something sort of drained from his face. His feet stopped.

"I think it's her brother, man." Larry said.

David bounced the basketball, looking at Eric, then looking at Larry, then at Eric. Finally he spoke.

"Both of you. (*pong*) Get the fuck out of here. (*pong*) Now. (*pong*) He cradled the ball against his hip, glaring at them. "Before I put both your eyes out."

David had that look. That look that always made Patty let him have his way no matter how much of an asshole he was being. One cold blue eye staring out from behind strings of limp blonde hair. That look that made her remember what he did to Monty Rittenhouse, how if Monty hadn't ducked in time, David really could have killed him with the baseball bat.

Eric worked his jaw muscles like he had something stuck in his teeth, gripping his own ball between his hands. He started to muster up something to say to David, but Larry tugged on his shirt.

"Let's get outta here, man. Leave these psychos."

Eric plucked up one foot, then the other, backward, then turned and followed Larry. As soon as they were across the street, Eric looked back, eyes squinting, red-faced.

"Fucking Lofthauses! You're all fucking psychos!"

Then they both ran to the railroad trestle.

David turned around and looked at Patty, then resumed dribbling the ball.

“Well, they’re right about *you*, anyway. Up in a freaking tree.”

“Shut up.” Patty rubbed the blood from her elbow. She blinked away the tears that were stinging her eyes.

“Come on,” David nudged her shoulder softly with the ball. “I’ll teach you how to shoot a jump shot.” He took three steps and shot, the ball rainbow-arc’d through the air and into the hoop.

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That night, it was TV dinners and Hawaii Five-O. Gloria was at a party and wouldn’t be home until late. After Hawaii Five-O, David showed her a few poker tricks and they sat on opposite ends of the couch, playing five-card draw as the sun went down, filling the room with orange light as flies buzzed around the remains on the aluminum TV dinner trays. Jinx barked and growled at everything that went past the door. More than usual.

“Shut up, you stupid dog!” David yelled.

“I’m goin’ to bed,” said Patty, shaking her foot that had fallen asleep.

“Take the trays and toss ‘em in the trash.”

“You.”

“You’re the one getting up. Besides, don’t forget who put ‘em in the oven.”

“I’m taking mine – you take yours.”

“You suck.” He groaned, grabbing his dirty tray. “Hey Jinx!”

David flung it like a frisbee to Jinx, who immediately ran off with it.

“Boner petite!” he laughed.

The word “boner” made Patty remember Eric and Larry.

“David, is it normal for boys to act like assholes?”

“It’s normal for *people* to act like assholes. It doesn’t matter if they’re girls or boys. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Is that why you hate everybody?”

“Pretty much.” David followed her into the kitchen, pulled the peanut butter out of the cabinet and stuck a spoon in it. He ate it off the spoon while Patty poured a glass of red Kool-ade.

“And is it normal for boys to talk about boners all the time?”

David laughed around the wad of peanut butter.

“Forget it.” He screwed the jar lid back on. “I’m not talking to you about boners. I got better things to do.” He took the peanut butter and spoon upstairs to his room. Patty heard his door shut. She tried to think of a way to thank him for saving her from Larry and Eric. She wanted to thank him when they were in the park, but she would have started bawling like a baby.

And he could be such a butthead.

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Patty lay awake that night, listening to the sounds on the staircase.

*Bump...bump...bump...bump...steps going down.*

*Bump...bump...bump...bump...steps coming up.*

Not heavy enough to even squeak the floorboards. Even their cat would squeak one or two of the floorboards when she came up. Patty’s breath was as loud as a steam

shovel. She shivered and drew the sheet up under her chin, even though a moment ago, it had been too hot to sleep. Down the hall the bathroom doorknob rattled. Then Gloria's bedroom doorknob. The linen closet door squeaked open. Then closed. What did she want tonight? What was she looking for? Why wasn't she staying in the attic where she belonged?

What would happen if she just went out there. Would she see the Ghost Lady? She'd never be able to fall asleep afterwards. Where was Gloria? She was supposed to be home by now. Patty watched the digital clock, its numbers flipping: 2:03, 2:04, 2:05...

*Bump...bump...bump...bump...*

Downstairs something fell off of something in the living room and hit the floor. Maybe she should call the police. If somebody says they're going to be home by midnight and it's past 2:00 am, isn't that what you're supposed to do? She'd seen it on TV. But she would feel stupid talking to a cop, saying my mom's not home yet. She'd feel like a baby.

She saw Gloria on the side of the road, her face covered in blood, glassy, dead eyes looking up to the black sky.

She saw Gloria tied up to a chair, evil kidnappers pacing around her.

She saw Gloria in a car with a mysterious new boyfriend, headed to another state, Minnesota, maybe. Some state where you could just disappear and never be found. The two of them, drunk and laughing.

The clock flipped and the Ghost Lady bumped and banged, and somehow, Patty shut her eyes tight, feeling all the swirling what-if thoughts grow tighter around her head, turning into jumpy disconnected dreams.

She found herself in a dream she had had before. How many times before, she didn't know. Each time it was the same. But each time it was a little bit different. She was in the car with Dad. He was driving them somewhere, just him and Patty. They were talking, and Patty had just finished saying something, and was waiting for him to say something back, but he doesn't say anything. Finally, she stops looking out the passenger window and turns to him, and this is the moment that's always the same, each time she dreams this dream. She turns to him and he's not there. The car is driving itself, nobody at the wheel.

Scenery whizzes by, cars pass, heavy traffic is coming up. Patty must make a decision. There's no time. She slides over and gets into the driver's seat. Her legs are barely long enough to reach the pedals and still see over the dashboard. She turns the wheel to avoid an oncoming car, but the car goes the opposite direction. It honks its horn and swerves wildly out of the way just in time, but everything Patty tries to make the car do, it does the opposite. And here's the part where the dream is different every time. Sometimes the car crashes into a giant wall, sometimes it's a telephone pole, sometimes it's a building – this time, Patty wakes up as a huge oak tree looms in front of the car. She stamps on the brake pedal, but nothing happens. It doesn't stop. It doesn't stop.

Her eyes snapped open. It was nearly dawn. She listened for what felt like a long time, but the only sound was the birds, slowly waking up outside. She got out of bed and padded down the stairs in the colorless dim. When she got to the last step, she felt it. As if she were walking into a solid thing. Like there was a No Trespassing sign hanging across the bottom of the stairwell. The air there was alive, electric.

Patty's feet wouldn't move, not even one more step. The air was almost humming. Danger: High Voltage. She craned her neck forward to peek around the bottom banister of the staircase, the air suddenly chilly against her face. In the blue, clammy light, she could see the sofa wasn't empty. Gloria was there, lying on her back, knees up, head under two pillows, with the old red and blue blanket over her. At her feet, someone was sitting with a hand on Gloria's knee.

At first, Patty tried to tell herself it must be one of Gloria's I am Woman friends. But she knew, even before she looked, that it wasn't.

It was her.

She was tiny. Shorter than Grandma. A woman made of thick, gray cloud. The kind right before it rains. When the face turned to her, it was not completely there. The Ghost Lady's eyes looked through Patty in a beam that went straight through her to the back of her head. The mouth made words that had no sound, but Patty felt them slice through her middle. This is how a cantaloupe feels when the knife cuts in, this is how a snake hears. That hand, that terrible, white, weightless hand on her mother's knee seemed to shrivel into a wisp of steam, and the Ghost Lady rose, fast and lilted, like a kite in the air, and disappeared into the book case. Patty dropped and folded herself into a ball, her heart pounding against her knees. She gripped the banister with one hand, her head in the other. Her fingers and toes hurt from the chill in the air, and her stomach twisted. She forced a few shivery breaths, and when she found she could move again, she gulped a lungful of air and ran to Gloria.

"Oh, sweetie..." Gloria's voice rasped. Her lips were dry and gray.

"Mom, where were you?"

“In the hospital, sweetie. My ribs...”

The story came out slowly, over a cup of yesterday’s heated-up coffee Patty brought Gloria from the kitchen. She’d fallen off the Martinson’s back porch, and just landed the wrong way, she said. Afterwards, she couldn’t stand up. They took her to the hospital, and the X-ray said it was two broken ribs.

“Why didn’t you call?”

“It hurts, for Christ sake. Maybe you don’t understand, honey – it was an emergency. Listen, I’m sorry. We’ll just have to make the best of it.”

And for the next few weeks, they brought her things. Books, coffee, sandwiches, beer. Every time she got up to go to the bathroom, she groaned like she was dying. Jessica showed up with an extension cord to make the phone reach to the living room couch, and that helped. Gloria stayed on the phone all day, the ashtray next to her piling up with cigarette butts.

Patty knew she was getting better when one day she came home and Jessica was there, putting the hair dye on Gloria’s head, Gloria on the step stool in the middle of the kitchen, Jinx’s towel wrapped around her shoulders.

“It’s Clairol auburn chestnut. Your mom’s gonna look great. It’ll be a little darker, but more natural.”

“If it’s dye, how can it be natural?”

“Patty, give your mother a break, will you?” Gloria sucked on her cigarette, but she had the little crinkle at the corner of her eye that said she actually thought it was funny.

Jessica was wearing overalls and yellow Playtex gloves. Her hair would probably never need to be died; it was a rolling river of golden copper, tumbling down her shoulders in waves, making its own light like a small sun. Blotting Gloria's temples with a wad of damp toilet paper, Jessica leaned back to check her work.

"Well?" said Gloria.

"Everybody's gonna say, *Does she? Or doesn't she?*"

"Only her shrink knows."

And Gloria and Jessica laughed. Gloria's laugh was starting to sound like Jessica's with the little snort at the end. Of course, in the commercial it was "Only her hairdresser knows," but Gloria was always the funniest when Jessica was around.

Later Jessica asked Patty to come with her to pick up Kentucky Fried Chicken for dinner that night. Gloria still couldn't cook yet. Even before the accident, though, she had been cooking less and less. There were more evenings where she wouldn't get out of bed for dinner, and tell the kids to just get something out of the fridge. Usually it would be a frozen pizza or sometimes David made French toast. Patty was looking forward to the chicken – it had been a while.

"Should we get a bucket? I love the bucket." Jessica said, signaling with her arm out the car window. Her left turn signal was busted out.

"Me too," said Patty. "I love the bucket, too."

The line was long at the counter, and they had plenty of time to discuss wings and drumsticks, backs and breasts. Patty hated breasts and loved drumsticks. Gloria loved breasts and backs. Jessica loved everything. David didn't care.

"So how's your mom doing, Patty?" Jessica said it quietly.

Patty looked up at Gloria, wondering what she meant. Hadn't she just spent the afternoon with her? What did she think Patty knew that she didn't? But Jessica was looking straight ahead at the menu on the board over the counter, her golden brown eyes big and sober.

"I don't know. Okay, I guess."

"Because she doesn't look so good to me. And I don't think it's just the ribs, you know what I mean?"

Patty was glad it was their turn next. It meant she didn't have to say anything, and maybe Jessica would let it drop, forget about it. But she didn't. On the way, driving back in the car, she brought it up again.

"The thing is, kid, she's under a lot of pressure. And I'm not sure she's holding up so good, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah," said Patty. And inside, part of her just wanted Jessica to shut up about it. She wanted to think of only the good stuff. That Gloria was feeling better now, that she had actually laughed today. But the other part of her knew Jessica was right. That part of her didn't want Jessica to shut up at all.

*Please tell me what to do.* These were the words in Patty's head, but she couldn't get them to come out of her mouth. It seemed so stupid and babyish.

"You and David are doing a great job, helping out around the house and stuff, but I just want you to know, I mean..."

And Jessica seemed to run out of words for a moment as she stuck her arm out the window and made another turn on her bad signal side. The freckles on her forearms stood out like cinnamon sprinkles.

“You got my number, right?” Jessica turned to her. Patty shook her head.

They came in the back door, Jinx following them in from the yard. Jessica put the bucket of chicken down on the counter, Jinx standing on his hind legs sniffing. Jessica picked up a pencil and wrote her name and phone number at the top of the mass of scribbles on the wall next to the yellow phone. Patty envied her friends who had neat, organized little lists of numbers posted next to the phone, police, fire, 24-hour drug store, their top five best friends. The Lofthouses had a wall of graffiti: numbers and messages written in pen and pencil, in a dozen different people’s handwriting, right on the paint. Someone had written “Power to the People!” Someone had written under it “Power to Jinx!”

“Listen, if anything happens, if she needs help, you call me, okay?” Jessica tapped the wall under her number, looking hard and serious in Patty’s eyes. “You promise you will? Don’t get into a thing where you think you should be able to handle everything, okay? You’re only twelve.” The steady look in Jessica’s eyes went all the way down to the soles of Patty’s feet, making her feel steady, too.

It felt good.

Patty nodded.

“Do I smell Colonel Sanders?” Gloria’s voice came from the living room. The spell broke.

“Hell, yeah,” said Jessica, “Patty, go get your brother. We’ll eat on the back porch.”

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Patty let Johann in first, then closed the door behind them. She held Jinx still while he wiggled and whined. She found herself listening for her Mom, but took a deep breath and decided to go ahead no matter what. If Gloria came home and found Johann there, maybe she'd lay off about why Patty wasn't bringing her friends over.

Johann wandered around the living room, reaching out to touch things; the glass bluebird family, framed photos of aunts and cousins, the sea shells from the Jersey Shore they'd collected when Patty was a baby. He had a funny look on his face, sort of sad and hungry, like he was looking at some kind of wonderful food he wasn't allowed to eat. He put everything back in exactly the spot he took it from, even matching the dust pattern exactly, so nobody could see it had been moved.

“What's that?” he said, pointing up to the top shelf.

“Oh, that's an old music box. It doesn't play.”

“Why not?”

Patty was a little surprised. The box was over a hundred years old, and as far back as she could remember, it had never made a sound.

“Well, it's broken. It's just too old, I guess. It was my great-grandfather's. They brought it over with them from Germany.”

“Can I see it?” Johann's eyes flashed with excitement. It was pretty funny, Patty thought, why was he getting so worked up over an old broken music box? But Johann liked machines -- building things, taking them apart. She climbed up on the cabinet below the shelf, brought the box down and placed it in Johann's hands.

It was a little bigger than a cigar box, a little smaller than a shoe box, made of thick, polished cherry wood, stained dark brown with age. He lifted the lid, decorated on

the inside with a painting of a pasture, tiny white sheep dotting the hillsides. A little blonde shepherd boy wearing bright blue knickers sat on a boulder in the sun, playing a flute.

“Look,” said Johann, “the writing on the side here is German!”

“I know,” said Patty. “Can you tell what it says?”

Johann moved his lips as he read it. “Something about springtime... wheat fields...something white -- *weiss*. But it’s a kind of German I’ve never seen before.”

He turned it over and tried the big brass key on the bottom.

“That’s the part that doesn’t work. Nobody can get that key to move.”

Johann tried it one way, then another.

“Don’t force it – it might break.”

“I know,” he said. He felt around the edge of the box until he found a spot to lift the whole bottom loose. Patty was amazed – she hadn’t even known the bottom came off. He did it like it was nothing.

Inside was a crazy jumble of strange, tiny machinery. In the center was a big brass cylinder, covered with tiny bumps arranged in a pattern that looked like a secret code. These bumps were arranged to move the tiniest array of metal keys, pounded flat as feathers, corroded now, and so dull, it was impossible to tell what kind of metal they were made of.

Johann sat down on the floor with the music box on his lap. He poked and twisted at parts of it, looking inside of it from every angle. He asked Patty for the smallest screwdriver they had in the house. She rifled through the drawers, until she found the tiny one Gloria used to fix her glasses with.

Very happy with this tool, Johann prodded deeply into the works, looking like a surgeon doing major operation. “They must have really liked this box a lot to bring it all the way on a ship from Germany. It’s heavy.”

“Be careful,” said Patty.

“Of course,” he said.

Poke, poke, twist – prod, prod, twist. No matter what he did, the key remained cemented in place. Finally, he leaned back and sighed, letting the screwdriver droop in his hand. He looked so sad, Patty felt she should say something.

“It’s okay. Nobody’s been able to fix it. Not even my dad.”

Johann almost looked like he was going to cry. What if he did? Patty thought, suddenly panicking a little. She couldn’t figure it out. What was the big deal about a music box?

“It’s not fair. If I could get it to work, it would be so cool. It has four songs in it. Did you know?”

Patty hadn’t known. She looked at it as if for the first time. Suddenly, she was dying to hear those songs.

“Wow. Such a drag that it’s broken,” she said. Maybe she was catching Johann’s mood, like a cold. Suddenly all seemed very sad.

“I’ll bet your great-grandfather’s family used to sit around this box at night,” said Johann, stroking the lid of it, “before radio was invented, even. And maybe they even sang along to the words. Because they were in a strange country. And the songs were from home. I’ll bet that’s why they brought it with them. And now we’ll never know what it was they heard.” His eyes stayed fixed on the little shepherd boy on the inside of

the lid, his hand gripped tightly around the screwdriver, and for a second it seemed as if he might stab into the box, rip out its machine guts, pull the songs out by force. Then he sighed and set the screwdriver down. He snapped the bottom plate back in place and handed the box to Patty.

“Some stuff just can’t be fixed.” And all the tightness of his face flattened out like a white sheet spread over a bed, and he was the straight-backed little soldier again. Patty searched his face, but she couldn’t see anything else there. It made her feel cold, somehow – all that excitement, all that *wanting* to fix it, suddenly gone. How could he just stop a feeling like that? Like blowing out a match. She wondered if she’d ever be able to do it. She put the box back on the shelf.

“So, what do you want to do now?” she asked.

“I don’t know. What do you want to do?” Johann rolled over on his back and stretched his feet up to the ceiling.

Patty thought for a while. “You want to ride bikes to the park?”

“I don’t have a bike,” he said, giving her a soft kick in the shoulder.

“You can ride my brother’s. He’s still at school.”

“You don’t think he’d mind?”

“I’ll leave him a note. Don’t worry. He hardly ever rides it.”

Out in the garage, Patty pulled out her blue Schwinn first, then David’s black three-speed. Johann helped her, running his hand over the seat.

“Man, your brother’s tall, isn’t he?”

“I guess. Taller than you, anyway.”

Johann stuck his tongue out at her, then swung his leg over the cross bar to try it out.

“Have you got a spanner so I can lower the seat a bit?”

“A what?”

“A spanner. You know--” he said, pointing at the bolt under the seat.

“What are you talking about?”

Johann dropped his head and sighed in obvious frustration. “Have you got a box of tools? Anywhere?”

“Why didn’t you just say?” said Patty, getting annoyed now. She pulled down the big red toolbox from the shelf. Johann ran over and took it from her.

“Why, you think ‘cause I’m a girl I can’t carry it?”

“No,” he said, opening the box and pulling out an adjustable wrench. It turned out that’s what a spanner was.

“Well, dang -- if you’re gonna say everything in South African all the time, don’t expect regular people to understand you!”

Johann opened his mouth to reply, then stopped. “Hey is that your mother coming?”

Patty’s heart jumped as Gloria teetered up the walkway. “Hey Patty! Who’s your friend?” She had one shoe off and was yanking off the other one. Her feet still in her pantyhose, getting dirty on the pavement. Patty winced. Why couldn’t she wait until she got in the house?

“Come on, let’s go,” she said, wheeling her bike out the driveway. He followed, but there was no getting past Gloria.

“Can you believe it? I just bought these shoes two months ago, and the heel just broke! I’m walking around like one of Jerry Lewis’s special kids all day.” Patty felt her cheeks burning. Jerry Lewis was a totally obnoxious comedian who did telethons for cerebral palsy on TV every year, parading the kids out on stage to show how well they could get around on their metal crutches. It was embarrassing to even mention his name. Her mom was staring at the broken shoe in her hand, swaying back and forth, like even standing on two feet was an effort.

“Cheap-ass shoes,” Gloria tossed the good one onto the front porch. Then she gave Johann the once-over. “So what’s your name, kiddo?”

“Johann, Ma’am.”

“Ma’am - isn’t that cute? Are you British?”

“No Ma’am, South African.”

“No kidding? When did you--”

“Anyway, Mom, we gotta go. We’re riding our bikes to the park.” Patty pushed off, reaching out to slap Johann across the shoulder as she did, in case he didn’t get the message. As she brushed past Gloria, she could smell the brandy on her breath.

“Wha-- you kids have to go right now?”

“Well, yeah, Mom. Remember what you said about riding bikes in the dark? We gotta get back before it gets dark. Right?”

“Well, okay, but... You...you come back any time, Yoann, okay?” Gloria waved her broken shoe at him. Johann smiled and waved back.

“Come *on*, let’s go!” Patty whispered to him between her teeth.

They whizzed under the trees, leaving Patty's house, Patty's street, Patty's life, far behind.

"Your mom seems nice," Johann's voice said behind her.

"Yeah. Yeah she's great," Patty said, biting her lip.

"What's the matter?" said Johann, pulling the bike up beside her now.

"Nothing. Forget it."

"You sure?"

Patty looked at him, letting her hair blow in her face, hoping it would hide her expression. "Come on," she said, leaning forward into the pedals. "I'll race you to the bottom of the hill."

## Chapter Ten

*"...reassured that signals from the Voyager probe have resumed after mission control experienced a brief lapse in communication from the craft yesterday afternoon. In other news, negotiations on the Panama Canal treaty continue to be deadlocked as..."*

Patty put her fingers in her ears. Why was the radio on so loud? She went over to the stereo and turned the volume down.

"I'm *listening* to that!" Gloria's voice came from the dining room.

She was sitting in her bathrobe, smoking a cigarette, a glass of brandy in front of her, next to the bottle, cap off. It was a little after 9:00 in the morning.

"Does it have to be that loud? Can't you hear it from in there?"

Gloria flicked the ashes from her cigarette. Her eyes were red-rimmed, staring too wide, too open behind her smudged glasses. She seemed to stare through Patty, looking into something only she could see. There was fear in her eyes. Fear like when Gloria saw a mouse, only about twenty times that.

“I need you to turn that back up.” Her voice was low and flat. It seemed to belong to somebody else. Now Patty was the one who was frightened. But she did what Gloria asked.

*“...are still demanding the release of three Red Army Faction prisoners in exchange for German businessman Hanns-Martin Schleyer, who was kidnapped on...”*

“The Red Army. There! Did you hear it? The Red Army...”

“Mom, what are you talking about? You don’t even usually listen to this station--”

“But I *should* have been! I should have been all along. Don’t you understand?”

Gloria’s voice rose, now matching the volume of the radio. “They’re trying to *tell* us something! Something about the communists, something about a war...”

Patty’s heart beat hard. She had never heard Gloria speak like this before. Never seen her eyes like this before – red around the edges and green and burning inside, like someone else was looking out of them.

*“...opened fire on several thousand demonstrators in Johannesburg protesting the arrest of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko. The South African government denies--”*

“Patty,” Gloria said, shaking her head, “this is bigger than anything we’ve seen yet. This is what we were afraid of. What I’ve been afraid of since the day your brother was born. When the missiles were headed for Cuba. That time Kennedy got us out of it. The Russians had missiles aimed right for us. Minutes away. I prayed -- I didn’t even

know who I was praying to, but I *prayed*, Patty!” Gloria grabbed Patty’s hand, squeezing hard. “I prayed my children would be safe, but now it’s happened. It’s *happened*.”

Gloria took off her glasses and ran red-knuckled, trembling hands over her face.

“Mom...” Patty tried to reach for her. Gloria stood up from the chair so fast it nearly tipped over backwards.

“Listen, damn it! Just *listen*. I need to know what they’re saying – I can almost get it. They aren’t going to tell us when the bombs start falling. They don’t want to create panic.”

Gloria’s hands dropped to her sides, loose in the sleeves of her robe, forgotten. She never stood like that. Ever. Nothing about her was normal.

But what if she was right?

What if Patty was the one who didn’t know what she was talking about? Wasn’t it possible? Wasn’t her mother always the one who told her how to understand the news? About the American soldiers pacing around piles of bodies in the Vietnamese swamps, about the Watergate hearings, about Nixon’s lies – hadn’t Gloria always been right?

*“...claiming the White House has been circling the wagons on this issue, engaging in a defensive posture, particularly in regards to...”*

Gloria gripped the sides of her head, clutching her hair. “You hear? They’re preparing for the attack. They’ve all been sent into the White House bomb shelters... It’s starting already...” Gloria squeezed her eyes shut and teetered to the couch. Patty kept watching her, but reached slowly behind her for the volume knob as Gloria sat.

“Don’t you DARE turn that off!” Gloria’s voice broke in the middle like a burnt matchstick. She went from collapsed in a pile on the couch to rocketing straight up in her

seat, faster than Patty could see. Even her neck seemed to have lengthened, like someone had stuck a stick straight up her spine. Patty had couldn't look at her anymore – it was too much. She had to get out. She ran out the front door, not even shutting it behind her.

Patty kept running, across the street, across the park, to the pine tree. She needed to be up there to think. Dad was supposed to be coming later that day to pick them up to take them for the day. But he wouldn't be there for a couple of hours. In the meantime...in the meantime, what?

Patty swung herself up on her favorite branch, crouched on it, hugging the trunk of the tree, pressing her ear against its rough bark, grateful for the silence of its heart, that it wasn't blaring at her.

Gloria couldn't be right – could she? If she was right, then something horrible was happening. Something like a nuclear war. If she was wrong...if she was wrong it was almost worse.

Patty's head swirled and churned. It felt like their washing machine when the Imbalanced Load light was blinking. Nothing made sense – there should be a way to make sense of it, shouldn't there? She hugged the tree tighter, until the bark scratched her cheek. She had to *do* something. But the more she thought, the worse it got.

“Patty!”

David's voice reached her from across the street. He was standing at the corner, the wind blowing his hair in his face. No jacket on, like her. She swung down and dropped to the ground from the lowest branch. They met in the middle of the street.

“What's wrong with mom? Did you see her?” Patty asked.

“Yeah. She’s gone crazy. We can’t go in there. Not until Dad gets here.” He crossed his arms in front of him, against the cold. He kept his eyes on the house, like he didn’t trust it to let it out of his sight. His lips were a white line.

“But Dad’s not supposed to be here until noon. Can’t we--”

“I just tried to call him – there’s no answer. So we just gotta stay outside, okay?”

David looked at her, and she could see in his eyes he was as scared as she was. The wind blew down on them from the cemetery hill, simmering through the oak trees, their leaves brittle and tired from the long summer. It sighed through the pine tree, a sound like crying. Patty could smell all the fall cemetery smells; the dead leaves, black earth, crushed acorns, cool, damp limestone slabs. She hugged herself.

“I’m cold,” she said.

“Yeah. Well...” said David. He turned back to the house. Goosebumps stood up on his arms, still tan from all those days at the beach, the blonde down on them catching the morning sunlight, blowing in the wind.

“What if I sneak in the back door?” Patty asked. “Really quiet I mean, and I’ll just get our jackets?”

“Mine’s in the living room – you’ll never make it.”

“I could get up to your room. Get your sweatshirt. And one for me, too.”

David looked at her, a wrinkle between his eyes that Patty had never seen before. Not like the mad wrinkle – that one she knew. This was a crooked, scared wrinkle.

“I should do it,” he said.

“No, I’m quieter than you. I can do it faster.”

David couldn't argue with this. It was true. Patty had always been able to sneak up on him. It was the one advantage she had over his strength.

"Okay. But don't talk to her. Even if she sees you. Just get out as soon as you can, and come right back here. Okay?"

Patty managed to slip inside unnoticed and even up and down the stairs as the announcer screamed farm prices through the house and Gloria muttered to herself on the couch. Jinx followed at Patty's heels with his tail down, whining. Even he knew none of this was normal. Patty grabbed a sweatshirt from each of their rooms. Then she wrapped Jinx's leash in David's sweatshirt so he wouldn't see it, get excited and give her away. As she passed through the kitchen, she remembered Jessica's phone number, written on the wall. Patty reached up and dialed the number. She took the phone in the bathroom off the kitchen, shutting the door behind her. The phone rang and rang and rang. Jinx whined at the bathroom door. Finally, she hung up. Why wasn't anybody home?

She ran across the street, Jinx straining at the leash. He jumped on David as they put on their sweatshirts.

"Jessica wasn't home, either," Patty said.

"You called Jessica? What's *she* gonna do?"

"I don't know. She said call if we need her, so I called."

"Well, we *don't* need her." David grabbed the dog's leash and started walking. Patty followed him, not even knowing where they were supposed to go.

"But don't you think somebody should look at her besides us?"

"Why? So they can see how drunk and crazy she is and feel sorry for us? Jessica can't do anything. She'd probably just make a big deal out of it."

“Well – isn’t it a big deal already?”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t. Just...you think grownups can fix things, but they can’t. Not everything, they can’t.”

David was going too fast, Jinx dragging him along, as he dragged everybody along who tried to take him for a walk. Nobody had ever gotten him to heel. Patty was trotting along behind to keep up.

“But...but what if she has to go to the hospital or something?”

David yanked the dog back and wheeled around. He pointed at Patty’s chest.

“Don’t talk about that. Don’t even *mention* that.” His eyes were wide, flaring.

“What? The hospital?”

“She goes into the hospital, and then what happens to us? You ever stop and think about that? Huh? Jesus, you’re so *stupid*.”

This was too much.

“I am *not!*” Patty practically screamed it. Jinx’s ears drooped and his tail went down, thinking he’d done something wrong. “We have to *do* something! We can’t just leave her like that! We have to get help!”

“What kind of help?”

“I don’t know – a doctor or something. Somebody who can help her!” Patty was sobbing now, even with the sweatshirt on, she was so cold.

David grabbed her shoulders and shook her. “You don’t get it, do you? You call anybody – doctors, police, firemen, *anybody* – and they send the social workers to come take us away!” He shook her again. “Look at me, man. You think I’m kidding? It happened to a kid at my school, okay?”

“No...” Patty was shaking her head. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true. “Dad wouldn’t let anybody take us away. He’d let us come live with him.”

“He doesn’t want us to. Can’t you tell? Do I have to spell it out? He doesn’t want us there.”

Patty fell on her knees and hugged Jinx around the neck. He licked her face and whined while she cried. David dropped the leash, knowing the dog wasn’t going to go anywhere now. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, almost pleading.

“Where would we even sleep? In the beanbag chairs? There’s no space in that apartment. Dad and Lorraine don’t even have their own bedroom. I’m not sleeping in fuckface Todd’s room, that’s for damn sure.”

They sat for a while at the foot of the tree, pulling acorns out from under them until they both realized they were ravenous. David counted the change in his pocket. They made their way out of the cemetery, and he bought a bag of potato chips and a Payday at the corner store next to the high school. They split both between them, looking out over the football field where the boys were arriving for practice.

“So what’s it like going here?” Patty asked, her mouth full of Payday. David had just started high school that fall.

“It’s okay. They got a good science lab.” He reached into the bag of chips. “We have to read *Wuthering Heights*.”

When they got home, they tied the dog up in the back yard and stayed out by the front door until their father came to get them. He pulled up in his blue Chevy, got out of the car, looked at the two of them, sitting there on what Johann called the stoep, and made a shrugging, *what the hell* gesture.

“What’s going on, guys? You look like somebody died.”

“Hi Dad.”

“Is that what you’re wearing? Why don’t you go in and get on a clean pair of pants, David? I have to talk to your mother.”

Patty and David followed behind, but would go no further than the front entryway.

Gloria was pacing across the carpet with a bottle of Leinenkugel beer in her hand, bathrobe flapping. The radio was still blaring.

“Ted! My God, did you hear? Have you been listening?”

Ted stood in the entryway, frozen. Gloria turned up the volume even higher.

*“...all forty-nine crew members were rescued by the Coast Guard after a fourteen hour search. The ship is thought to have run aground after a tropical storm in the Bahamas...”*

“I can understand it now – all of it. Jesus, the whole thing... If you listen, you’ll hear it too. It’s started, Ted, it’s started. I don’t know where you can get the kids where it’s safe. There’s nowhere we can hide from this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Didn’t you hear them? The *Coast Guard!* Don’t you get it? It’s the war! They’ve started bombing the coasts, from submarines! Nuclear submarines – they talked about that just before you got here.”

*“...after a power outage in Philadelphia left over a hundred thousand people without electricity overnight...”*

“You hear that! They’ve bombed Philadelphia!” Gloria was practically screaming, pointing at the stereo speaker on the wall. Her eyes were fevered and bright behind her smudged glasses. Her weight teetered from one foot to the other. Patty looked at the floor. She couldn’t stand it. She didn’t want to look at her. Maybe she’d never look at her again.

“Come on, kids,” said their dad, without looking at them. He was staring at Gloria. “Let’s get in the car.”

“What about my pants, Dad?”

“They’re fine, never mind. Just go.”

It had started raining a little, so Dad rolled up the windows and turned on the wipers. It was the only sound in the car for a long time. He usually played the radio, but he left it silent this time. Patty, riding in the back, leaned up onto the back of his seat so she could see his face.

“Dad? What do you think about Mom?”

“She’s drunk.”

And that was the only thing he would say about it, to either of them, the whole day. By the time they all had dinner, with Lorraine and Todd and Sarah, it wasn’t exactly that they’d forgotten about it, just that for a while, it wasn’t there anymore. Everything was so normal, just like a regular day over there. Lorraine made them all spaghetti, and Todd tried to make his sister cry by throwing noodles in her hair. The Wizard of Oz was on TV that night and Sarah and Patty and Todd watched it in Sarah’s room, while everybody else watched the Packers on the other TV. Sarah kept complaining about how they got stuck with the black and white TV again, which totally ruined the scene where

Dorothy comes out of the house in Oz for the first time and the dead witch's feet roll up, even though they'd all seen it a million times in color already. Patty complained along with her, glad for a while to have this be the biggest problem in the world. Or at least to pretend it was. She was glad, for now, that nobody else knew her mother was drunk and crazy.

Dad let them spend the night that night. David actually did sleep in one of the beanbag chairs, and Patty slept in Sarah's room, keeping the game of let's-pretend-to-be-normal going the whole time.

The next day, Gloria stayed in bed all day, saying she had a headache. She didn't mention anything that had happened the day before. It seemed like she didn't even remember it, which was totally weird. It almost made Patty wonder if it had happened at all.

Patty kept trying to reach Jessica. It was late afternoon when she finally heard a hello on the end of the line, and she told her the whole story without stopping. Jessica told her she was on her way and would meet Patty in front of the high school. Patty practically ran all the way there.

On the front steps, she looked up and down Regent Street for Jessica's car. If some child molester pulled up instead, Patty reflected, and snatched her away to his Ed Gien dungeon, there wouldn't be any witnesses.

Finally, there was the little green car with the busted-out turn signal and Jessica's freckled arm waving out the window. Patty got in and Jessica took off, turning at the next corner.

“I thought maybe we could go to Mickey’s Dairy Bar. I haven’t had lunch yet. Is that okay?” Jessica asked.

“Yeah.”

They sat in the corner booth, far enough from other people so nobody could eavesdrop. Jessica ordered Patty a chocolate milk shake and a hamburger and coke for her.

“David says we shouldn’t tell anyone,” Patty was saying, swirling the straw in the tall, thick glass. She looked around, but there were only about five other people in the place and they weren’t paying attention. The afternoon sun was filtering through the windows lighting up the chalk board with the day’s specials written on it. “He says if she ends up in the hospital she might not come back.” Jessica was looking hard at Patty. “He said I shouldn’t even tell you.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t listen to him,” said Jessica.

“If Mom goes to the hospital, are they going to keep her there?”

“Honey, if they take your mom to the hospital, it’s going to be for something they call rehab. It means they won’t let her drink. No beer, no brandy, no gimlets. And she might feel sick for a while. She might feel *really* sick. But then she’ll get better. And then she’ll come home.”

Jessica’s eyes were looking into hers and Patty knew she meant it. But David had meant it, too.

“How do you know?” said Patty. Almost in a whisper.

“I know because I have friends who’ve gone through it. It’s not a nuthouse. It’s temporary. They come out.”

“And then she’ll be better? For good?”

Jessica’s eyes wavered and she bit her lower lip. Patty knew then that Jessica didn’t know either. The bottom of her stomach dropped.

“What I *do* know,” Jessica said, quieter now, “is that if she doesn’t get help, it’ll get a lot worse.”

“You mean, worse than what happened yesterday?”

Jessica’s eyes reddened and welled up with tears.

“Yeah. Worse than what happened yesterday. It gets worse.”

Patty tried to imagine worse, but found that she couldn’t. She was having a hard time thinking about anything except stirring the milkshake in front of her. She didn’t even really want it.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there the other day,” said Jessica. “I’m sorry I didn’t realize how bad it was getting. I’ve been all messed up with my own problems. Listen, I haven’t told your mom this yet, but I’m pregnant.”

Patty looked up at her, and opened her mouth to say something, but what? Was it a good thing or a bad thing? Should she say *congratulations*, or *what a drag*?

Not quite in answer to Patty’s questions, Jessica added, “I’m keeping it.

“Even though you’re not married or anything?”

“Yep. Even though I’m not married or anything.” This last part she sighed out, sounding almost tired. Her eyes drifted away to the Juke Box. It was playing The Rolling Stones. *Hey You, Get Offa My Cloud*. Then she looked at Patty again, took her hand and squeezed it.

“Anyway, I don’t want you to even think about that right now. That was just to tell you what’s been going on. Why I’ve been kind of in my own world lately. But we’re gonna deal with this. I’m gonna get on the phone and get your mom some help.”

“How long is it going to take? Before she gets help, I mean?”

“I wish I knew, honey. But you know, you can’t *make* them go. They have to agree to go, you know what I mean? I don’t know how much your mom thinks she needs help. That’s why you have to leave this to me. And you can’t tell her we had this conversation. Okay?”

“Okay. I won’t tell.”

“Good kid. Ah, here comes the food.” A big-bosomed waitress with a plastic nametag that said Darlene winked at Patty and set down the plates.

“Want some fries?” Jessica offered after she left.

Patty took one, just to be polite. “Is it Rick’s? The baby?”

Jessica darted a quick look at Patty and stabbed her straw into her coke, crunching it through the ice.

“Yeah.”

“Is he still being mean to you?”

A whole new look came into Jessica’s face, like the horses at the riding stable when they laid their ears back and were about to buck.

“Who told you that? Did Gloria tell you that?”

“She said he was mean to you sometimes. That sometimes he--”

“Look, we’re not talking about that, you and me. Okay?” Her voice had gone higher, tighter. “I’ll talk to you about *anything* -- anything else in the world. But not that. I mean it, kid.”

Patty’s hand froze over the fries.

“Okay. It’s okay.”

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It was sunny and cool the next day, and Patty had something to show to Johann. She pushed aside the low bushes hanging over the creek and pointed just ahead of her.

“See? It’s right there.”

Johann came up beside her, following her gaze. He pushed his hair out of his eyes, unnecessarily, because he’d just had a haircut. It was as if his hand just did it automatically and would forever and ever.

“Wow – I’ve never noticed it before. Where does it go to?” he asked.

“Under the street. Into a pipe, like, for almost a mile, until it comes out near the school. I know people who’ve gone the whole way.”

“What do you mean, gone the whole way?”

“Through the pipe. Crawled, I mean. It’s too small to stand up in.”

“Wouldn’t they be washed away? Couldn’t you drown in there?” Johann’s eyes were growing blue marbles in his head.

“Not this time of year. In spring, when the snow melts, maybe. Or after a big storm. But you can see how low the water is now. Wanna look?” Johann was already creeping closer.

They stepped along the edge of the creek, avoiding the slick mud at the banks, searching out the dry rocks that provided good footing.

Patty crouched down in front of the grated culvert, and Johann did the same. Together they looked into the black, endless tunnel. A narrow slick of stagnant water marked the course of it, reflecting pale light and diminishing into its depths until it, too, was swallowed by the blackness.

“People really go down there?” Johann whispered. “How do they get in?”

Patty gripped the edges of the iron bars of the grate and pulled them back, testing them. It seemed loose on Johann’s side. They both wiggled it back and forth like a loose tooth. The grate was in bad shape; bits of rust chipped off of it and peppered the rocks below, but the opening still wasn’t quite big enough.

“Oh, I know what the problem is,” said Johann, and with his foot, he pushed a large gray rock to the side and tumbled it into the creek, exposing a colony of alarmed grubs beneath, and widening the opening just enough to let them both through.

“Alright, we’re in. Now what?”

“Now, we see how far we get.”

The best way to go was in a half-crouch, shambling along like monkeys, careful to avoid the slimy water that ran down the middle of the tunnel. Testing it with a stick, they found it was only a couple of inches deep, but they didn’t want to get near it, just the

same. Soon they discovered a problem. The light from the entrance was entirely gone now, and they couldn't see what lay in front of them.

"We need a torch," said Johann.

"What? Light a fire in here? Are you crazy?"

"What? Who said anything about a fire?"

"What we need is a flashlight."

"That's what I said!"

"You said a *torch*."

"Look, we've got one at home. I know where it is. Let's just go back and get it, and then we can see where we're going."

On the way, Johann explained that a torch and a flashlight were actually the same thing in South Africa. Why not? Just one more weird thing about Johann's weird country.

Johann's mother was reading on the couch. She told them to be back by three and she'd have tea and cake ready.

"Yah, alright," he called behind him, taking the steps two at a time up to his room, Patty close behind. "If we come back alive, that is," he whispered, with a dangerous little smile at Patty. He dug the flashlight out of his closet, which, Patty was comforted to notice, was a chaotic mess. At least *something* in his perfect house was.

With the flashlight, they could go a lot faster. It helped them to avoid obstacles in their path: sticks, lumps of rotting dead leaves, garbage that had washed down the drains. The tunnel went from a corrugated metal bottom to a cement bottom. It widened at certain points, letting in sunlight from grates overhead. At these places they could stand up, and get some relief from the cramps in their legs from the monkey-crawl. At one of

these spots, they found a wall dry enough to lean against. On the opposite wall, somebody had written in red magic marker, “Lisa Shapiro is a slut.”

“Now, who do they suppose is going to read that all the way down here?” Johann remarked.

“I dunno. Lisa Shapiro? Maybe she lives down here.”

“If she lives down here, she has bigger problems than just being a slut.”

For some reason, Patty found that so funny she almost fell over laughing. That was when she realized she really had to pee.

“Where do you think we can go down here?” she wondered.

“How about off that way?” Johann pointed into a smaller pipe opening, branching off to the side of their path. No grownup could get into it without crawling on their belly, but Patty managed to make a ball of herself and go in about ten feet while Johann held the flashlight at the entrance. She managed to get her pants unzipped.

“Okay, turn it off now.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t need to see me peeing, that’s why!”

“Won’t you be afraid in the dark?” Johann tried to make it a serious question, but she could hear him trying not to laugh, even though the light was in her eyes and all she could see was his knees.

“Shut it off, or else.”

“Or else what?” He was laughing out loud now.

“Or else I’ll spy on you when it’s your turn.”

“It’s not the same – you’ve already seen everything.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You have a brother – that’s what I mean.”

Wieners again. Wieners and boners. Was that all boys ever thought about?

“I’m not going until you turn it off.”

“Oh, alright,” Johann made it sound like a great disappointment. It was pitch black when he turned out the light and she almost changed her mind and told him to turn it back on. She was almost finished when the light flicked on suddenly practically blinding her.

“Hey!”

Click, and blackness returned.

“Sorry, it was an accident!” but she could hear he was laughing.

“Very funny,” she had to do some major acrobatics to avoid stepping in the puddle she’d made on her way back out.

“Well, that was very interesting. My turn!” Johann handed her the flashlight. He unzipped his fly and pointed into the tunnel entrance.

“You’re doing it right here?”

“I can’t stand up in that little pipe.”

“Boys are gross,” she said, half to herself. She pointed the flashlight into the tunnel ahead of them and flicked it on and off, trying to see how much of the tunnel she could memorize in her mind in half a second before returning it to blackness.

“You’re not even going to watch?”

“Like you said, I’ve seen everything already.”

“I thought you’d at least be interested.”

“Yawn!”

“Alright – I get the message.” He zipped up.

They proceeded down the main tunnel, Patty in the lead this time, Johann holding the light. The way was long and straight for a while, with no sunlight coming in from any direction. Patty felt her chest tighten a bit for the first time. Thoughts came to her then, thoughts she hadn't invited, but were there anyway. What if the ceiling suddenly collapsed for some reason? What if a water pipe exploded and filled the whole place with water? If they had to get out, how would they do it? They didn't even know where the next drain opening was. As if reading her thoughts, Johann said,

“A great place to stash a dead body, this. If I were a murderer, it'd be the first place I'd think of. Of course, you'd have to cut it into pieces first...”

Before Patty could shut him up, something shut *her* up. A noise coming from straight ahead. A kind of scratching, scabbling sound.

Patty stopped crawling and Johann's bony knee knocked into her back.

“What's wrong?” he said.

“Hand me the light,” she whispered.

Johann did, and she held her breath as she pointed it. The beam caught the flat coin of a single eye and set it glowing green in their direction. It was big, bigger than the biggest cat, its fur matted with mud, grit clinging to its whiskers, flashing a mouth full of needle-sharp teeth.

“What the hell is that?” Johann clung to Patty's arm so hard she was sure to have a bruise there tomorrow.

“A raccoon. A big one.”

“Jesus,” Johann whispered, poking his head so far over her shoulder, their cheeks were touching. He was still gripping her arm. “I’ve never seen one before.”

“You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. We don’t have them in South Africa. Or England, or Europe, or anyplace else.”

“Well, we got a bunch of them here. What’s wrong with it? Why doesn’t it run away?”

“Are they vicious?”

“Not usually. Not unless they have rabies.” As soon as she said it, she was sorry. Johann’s fingers dug even harder into her arm.

The raccoon seemed to struggle to lift itself off the muddy floor, but only got the front part up; the bristling, muscular shoulders, the little black-clawed hand struggling for leverage under him. That’s what the scratching sound had been. From the middle down, the body was heavy and limp, the bushy, ringed tail, the only part of him not covered with mud, lay unnaturally still.

“It must’ve got hit by a car. Then dragged itself down here,” Patty said. The raccoon’s eyes looked into hers and she was reminded suddenly of that look that Jinx would get when he had a bone. It showed its teeth again in a soundless snarl. The roof of its mouth looked pale and dry.

“The poor thing,” said Johann. “I wonder how long he’s been down here suffering?”

Patty looked for foam around its mouth, any trembling or weird, stiff muscle twitches -- things she had heard meant rabies. The raccoon just seemed broken, was all.

“Maybe if we could get it out of here. Get it to a vet. Maybe they could fix whatever is wrong with it.”

“Would a vet do that? Seriously? It isn’t a pet, you know. I mean, it doesn’t exactly look friendly, does it?”

“It’s just scared. Wouldn’t you be?”

“Look, it’s lying on a piece of cardboard,” said Johann. “We could try sliding it along, see if it will let us pull him.”

“Yeah,” said Patty, seeing now the flattened piece of a cardboard box. The raccoon might have been using it to stay off the wet concrete. Patty slowly reached forward until she had an inch of the cardboard between her thumb and forefinger. She pulled gently, a sandy scraping echoed in the pipe. It was heavy. The raccoon’s mouth stayed open in its silent scream as it watched the floor sliding out from under it. In a sudden black blur, it whipped its head around, impossibly fast, and made a snapping lunge for Patty’s hand. Johann pulled her back so hard they both fell over backwards.

“Are you alright? It didn’t get you, did it?”

“No. Oh, God...” Patty’s heart was pounding so hard, she felt it must be echoing in the tunnel. She held Johann’s hand tight as they both got to their feet slowly, keeping their eyes on the raccoon, which was now making a low, whining, hissing noise in their direction. It was a noise of absolute fear, rage, and pain. Patty felt herself starting to cry.

“Come on,” said Johann. “I’ll lead from here on. Keep hold of my hand.”

“We’re just going to leave him?”

“We have to. Come on.”

The rest of the way went a lot faster, mainly because they were in a hurry to get out. Patty couldn't stop crying. The raccoon hadn't really even come that close to biting her; it was the sound it had made. That horrible, sad, hopeless sound. She felt like she would never get it out of her head. Suddenly, in front of them was an amazing sight – a circle of yellow and orange leaves and sunlight, the exit of the long, dark tunnel at last.

It was much easier getting out than getting in. There wasn't even a grate over the opening this time. They stood up and brushed the grit off their knees and looked around. They were only about two hundred feet from the school bus stop.

“So this is where it goes,” said Johann. “That was absolutely amazing. We have to do that again. We've gone more than a kilometer underground, do you realize?” The excitement drained out of his face when he saw Patty. She was still crying.

“What's the matter? Still that raccoon?”

“Why couldn't we help it?” Patty was sobbing now. She didn't even know why. She knew the raccoon would die now. She'd never be able to forget how she'd failed.

Johann plunged his hands into his pockets and looked at the ground in front of him.

“Sometimes...” he said, “I think, sometimes, you can't help. Like this time. It didn't want to be helped, Patty.”

“*Why* didn't it want to be helped?”

“I don't know.”

“And because it didn't want to be helped, it's going to die? That's not fair! It isn't fair!” And Johann put his arm around her and let her cry until she couldn't anymore.

## Chapter Eleven

Linda held Patty's feet down on the matt and counted as Patty did situps. Mrs. Washerman, the gym teacher, paced up and down the rows of girls in pairs, doing the exact same thing.

"Partners, remember, you're counting! Don't just sit there like a lump o'mud!"

Linda counted louder, so as not to end up with Mrs. Washerman bending down and shouting in her ear in her thick, Alabama accent; something she tended to do when she felt girls weren't listening. Patty tried to look energetic, touched her elbows to her knees for real instead of just pretending.

"What a cow," she whispered to Linda, who stifled a laugh. "She thinks she's an army general or something."

"Someone needs to explain to her that her side lost the Civil War," Linda said, looking over her shoulder to make sure Mrs. Washerman was well out of earshot.

"Okay, girls, ten more and we're gonna do Chicken Fat!"

A chorus of groans broke out across the gym.

"That's right – Chicken fay-at!"

"Chee-yicken fay-yat," Patty drawled, causing Linda to double over in silent laughter.

"And if you girls think something is so damn funny, maybe you wanna laugh your butts to detention!" Mrs. Washerman's voice echoed off the ceiling, silencing the gym.

She didn't need a megaphone. She *was* a megaphone. Soon the record player was belting out the song they were all forced to exercise to twice a week, for their whole lives:

*Give that chicken fat back to the chicken, and don't be chicken again!* Sang the man, whose name Patty didn't know, but she knew she wanted him dead. This had to be what Hell was. Fifty sweating girls, tall, short, fat, skinny, ugly, pretty, all in matching red polyester shorts, even Tammy Schmidt and her gang of Barbie-doll idiot followers (the only ones who actually seemed to be enjoying it), all doing jumping jacks and touching their toes to the sound of a man whose nasty smile you could hear in his voice:

*Go, you chicken fat, go away! Go you chicken fat, go!*

And Mrs. Washerman -- was she actually clapping and singing along? Yes, definitely Hell, Patty decided. If Satan had a only one record to play, this would be it.

Finally, the song ended, and Mrs. Washerman assembled all the girls to sit in rows on the floor.

"Now, y'all may have seen the announcement about the Presidential Physical Fitness Award."

Patty had been hearing about that stupid award since she started middle school. Every year, about ten of them were handed out, and the same girls won it. Who else? Girls like Tammy Schmidt and her gang. You won it by doing a specific set of relay races, running track laps, sit ups, rope climbs, and a horrible form of torture called the arm hang. Each thing was timed, and if you scored in the top five percent, you got the award. The most annoying thing about it was that whether you gave a crap or not, you still had to participate in the competition. It was the worst part of gym class. It meant that for the next two months, everyone was going to be charted and rated and officially

categorized into the star girls, the mediocre girls, and the truly hopeless girls. This last category, was, of course Patty's. The fat, the slow, the skinny and sick, the hopelessly insecure. Or, if you weren't hopelessly insecure already, you would be after it was all over and the awards were handed out.

“So, I hope you girls are all ready for a fine competition this year. I got my eye on y'all!”

“God, not again,” Linda whispered, so only Patty could hear. Patty looked over her shoulder at Tammy, Kristen, Amy and the rest of the jock girls, who were all high-fiving each other and squirming with excitement. Tammy caught her eye and made a hideous face at her.

Suddenly, something shifted in Patty. She thought about her mom, passed out every day by dinner time. She thought about the Ghost Lady. About David, convinced that they were about to get hauled away by social workers. About Jessica, pregnant by her horrible boyfriend. The last thing Patty needed in her face right now was Tammy Schmidt.

Tammy Schmidt could get stuffed.

“You know, maybe I'll do it,” Patty heard herself say.

“What?” Linda whispered. “What are you talking about?”

Patty looked away from the jocks and at Linda. “The Presidential Physical Fitness Award. I think I'll try out for it. What the heck?”

Linda stared at her as if she'd just said she planned to walk on the moon.

“Why?”

“Why not? How hard could it be? A bunch of situps and running and junk. Just think if I won – it would give the jocks heart attacks.”

Linda stole a look over Patty’s shoulder at Tammy and her crew. Patty could see Linda’s great brain working. A little smile appeared at the corner of her lips.

“I guess it’s a...well, an *intriguing* idea. Imagine the look on Tammy’s face.”

“What could they say? It would totally shut them up.”

“At least in gym class,” Linda added. “You’ll just have to be careful you don’t become a jock yourself.”

The comment hit Patty like a glass of ice water in the face.

“I’m kidding!” Linda said clutching her stomach, trying to stifle her giggles. “Oh, if you could see the look on your face!”

“Very funny. You know Linda, I bet you could do the arm hang pretty good after carrying around all those books,” Patty said.

“Thanks, but no way, José. But if you really want to do it, I’ll help you. You can count on that.”

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On her way to horseback riding lessons with Dad, she considered telling him about her plan to compete for the award, but something stopped her. Maybe she needed to keep it secret for a while. Because what if she failed? What if she couldn’t do it? She decided not to tell anybody else but Linda.

Did that mean she actually *did* care whether she got it or not? It was confusing.

“So what’s going on, kid? How’s school?”

“Okay.”

“You know, a while back, your mother was telling me a teacher had sent home a note saying you were falling asleep in class, or something.”

“Not falling asleep. Just tired. School is a lot of hours.”

“Well, yeah, that’s what makes it school, I’m afraid. What’s the matter, are you staying up late, or what?”

How could she explain it to him? It didn’t matter what time you went to bed when there was a dead lady in the house waking you up every night, bumping around in the attic, walking up and down the stairs, pacing the hallways. And if it wasn’t the ghost, it was her mother out late again, or passed out in front of the TV. Patty had woken up three times to turn it off that week alone, Gloria’s mouth hanging open, arm draped over the couch at 3:00 am. How was she supposed to say any of this?

“The only class I like is art. And sometimes English. When we’re writing stories or reading something good. The rest of school is totally boring.”

“So you don’t fall asleep in art class?”

“No, but--”

“When I was a kid, I used to write these detective stories in class. I’d be pretending to study, bending over my paper like I was taking notes, but I had this character I’d invented, this private detective who lived in Philadelphia in a bad section of town, but he was always on a case, solving some gruesome crime in high society. In the process, he’d find out all the dirty secrets of the rich people. The ones who went to the best schools, lived in mansions. I wish I’d saved some of those stories. I bet I’d get a real laugh out of them now. It’s funny, now that I think about it, a lot of that was just me being mad at the rich kids.”

“Why were you mad at them?”

“They had everything. They had everything, and they didn’t even know it. They didn’t appreciate it. And they treated the rest of us, the kids who *didn’t* have everything, like we were below them. Like they just knew for a fact that we would grow up to be the people who waited on them. Drove their cars, opened doors for them, delivered their dry cleaning. I think I just wanted to fantasize about terrible things happening to them in their big, fancy houses.”

Patty thought about Larry and Eric, and her, up in the tree. How she’d imagined Larry’s head exploding. Maybe she wasn’t crazy. Maybe it was normal to want bad things to happen to mean people.

“Why are rich kids so mean, anyway? Like the jocks at school. If you don’t go to Turner’s gymnastics on the weekends, they act like you’re not even a human being.”

“That bad, huh? Well, I guess nothing’s changed. But I doubt any of them can ride a horse as well as you can.”

Patty felt a warmth spreading in her stomach, like butter melting over hot gingerbread. Then she remembered this would all be over in three hours. The lesson would end, she would lead Tinker back to the stable, brush his sweaty sides clean, get on her coat, and Dad would drive her home. Maybe to Mom passed out on the couch, or crying, or talking garbled nonsense to herself, or worse, not even there at all. The warm feeling rose like steam into the air and disappeared.

When Dad brought her back after the lesson, what she came home to wasn’t any of the things she’d thought about. A little green car was parked in their driveway.

“Whose car is that?” Dad asked.

“It’s Jessica’s,” said Patty.

“She needs to get that turn signal fixed. She could get pulled over. Tell her I said hi, will you?” Patty kissed him goodnight and ran into the house.

Jessica was sitting on the couch next to Gloria. Piled around her on the floor were two suitcases and a duffle bag, along with at least three purses and shoulder bags, stuffed with a strange collection of things – books, scarves, bottles of soda, a potted plant.

Patty took off her muddy riding boots and left them in the hallway. As she approached, Jessica looked up and there was a swollen red mark across her left cheek. She was holding an ice bag on her wrist.

“What happened?”

“Sweetie, sit down,” said Gloria, taking Patty’s hand.

Patty sat on the floor in front of the couch. Jessica was hunched over in a way Patty had never seen before. It made her seem shrunken, somehow. The red of the bruise was like fire against the pale cheek.

“Kiddo, it looks like I’m gonna be in your guest room for a few nights,” Jessica said, her voice gravelly.

“As long as you need, honey,” Gloria corrected, leaning over to sweep Jessica’s hair out of her eyes. Patty looked up at her mother, who drained her beer and got up to get another.

“Rick,” Gloria said over her shoulder as she disappeared into the kitchen, like that’s all that needed to be said.

Patty looked at Jessica. “He did that to you?”

“I can’t stay there. The baby--”

And her voice caught and broke on the word and two tears dropped to the carpet.

“You need another Seven Up, doll?” Gloria’s voice called out from the kitchen.

“No thanks,” said Jessica.

“Can I have one?” said Patty.

Gloria murmured yes, and Patty heard the bottle hiss open. She took Jessica’s hand and squeezed it.

“If he was here right now, I swear, I’d kick him in the nuts for this,” she said.

Jessica laughed just about the saddest laugh Patty had ever heard in her life and hugged her. Her hair smelled like oranges and wood smoke.

Gloria set Patty’s glass before her on the table, then flopped into the chair with a ragged sigh and cracked the beer can open.

“They’re all bastards. I swear to God, every damn one of them.”

Jessica said nothing. Patty sipped her Seven Up.

“That he would do this, knowing damn well it’s his own kid. That he wouldn’t even *care*,” Gloria continued.

“Oh, but you should’ve heard him goin’ on and on about how it *wasn’t*. All that coke’s made him so paranoid, he’s convinced himself I’m lying about it.”

“That’s insane!”

“*He’s* insane. I can’t believe what’s happened to him. Just in the last six months.”

“Honey, I hate to say it, but isn’t this what I was telling you last year? I said he was bad news, didn’t I?”

And as Patty listened, she wondered if she was a totally, completely selfish person for feeling happy, just to have Jessica sitting on their couch, and knowing that she

would be living with them. She'd get to see Jessica every day now, talk to her every day. Did it make her a horrible person to be just a little bit glad that this awful thing had happened to her?

That night, Gloria didn't get quite as drunk as usual. She even changed the sheets in the guest room and helped Jessica set it up. She sent Patty downstairs to get a fresh light bulb to put in the bedside lamp. She found David in the kitchen, drinking milk out of the carton.

"You heard what happened?" Patty said, climbing up onto the counter to get to the cabinet with the light bulbs.

"What now? Something about Jessica? I already know about her being pregnant, if that's what you're talking about."

"She's staying with us, now. Rick hit her, and now she's staying with us."

David looked into the mouth of the carton and swirled the dregs of the milk around. He put it back in the fridge, closed the door and stared at it.

"That's it?" Patty asked, "Aren't you gonna say something?"

"What do you *want* me to say?"

"I don't know." Patty looked through the light bulbs in the cabinet. "There's one hundred watt and sixty watt -- which one goes in a lamp?"

"Sixty."

David walked out of the kitchen and turned on the TV in the other room. Patty jumped off the counter, bulb in hand, and followed him.

"I'm just saying, Jessica's here now, so maybe now, who knows? Maybe Mom will feel better. What do you think? I'm thinking, maybe even--"

David turned the volume up high, so high it almost drowned Patty's voice out.

"David – I'm talking!"

He flung aside the magazine next to him. The pages ripped as it flew across the couch.

"Yeah, I freakin' *noticed* you talking, okay? And no, I have nothing to say about Jessica staying here. You think she's gonna solve everything? For your information, she's just as messed up as everybody else. Why else would she let that scumbag get her pregnant?"

"Shut up, she'll hear you!"

David's turned back to the TV. "Just leave me alone. Okay? Can you do that?"

"Jerk," Patty said as she marched out of the room, but she doubted David could hear with the TV turned up so high. Why did he have to be like that? What did he have against Jessica, anyway? Maybe she could get the answer out of him tomorrow, when he was in a less horrible mood.

But did it even matter what David thought? It wasn't like *he* had any answers, either. Don't tell anybody what's happening with Mom – that was his answer. Who was he to say if Jessica could help them or not? What did *he* know? The important thing was, now that Jessica was here, she'd have someone in the house besides David to talk to.

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The next morning, Jessica came downstairs while Patty was making toast and tea.

"There's cereal, but there's no milk because David drank it all last night."

"That's okay, kiddo, I'm not hungry."

Jessica sat on the kitchen stool and petted Jinx's head. She looked out the window at the sun spreading over the back yard. Purple smudges under her eyes showed she hadn't slept well. Her cheek was puffier than it had been the night before, but not quite as red. Jinx, of course, didn't mind how she looked, and closed his eyes with joy as she scratched his ears.

"Do you want a cup of tea, at least?" Patty asked, dangling a second Lipton tea bag by the string as a offering. Jessica managed a small smile.

"Yeah, okay. Probably the only thing I won't puke up."

Patty poured the water into their cups.

"Do you, like, puke every morning now?"

"Just about."

"You want sugar?"

"Just a spoonful. Hey, were you standing outside my door last night?" Jessica asked suddenly, as if she had just remembered something.

"Nuh-uh. Why?"

"Well, I don't think it was Gloria. She would have come to the other door – the one that comes off of her bedroom."

"Maybe David?"

Jessica looked out the window, shook her head and sipped the tea. "It was weird. Somebody was definitely watching me, like, looking in on me. And it wasn't a boy. Or a man."

"How do you know?"

Jessica looked up at her, her eyebrows drawn together, head tilted to the side. “I heard breathing. Sounds weird, I know, but – like a *woman* breathing.”

Patty gripped the handle of her tea cup hard. A little too hard: some of the hot liquid trembled over the brim and scorched her fingers.

“Well,” she said, wiping her hand on her pants. “Maybe it was my mom. You can ask her when she gets up.”

“I’m pretty sure I could hear her tossing and turning in bed in the next room. While the breathing was going on, I mean.”

Patty and Jessica looked at each other. Patty wondered if she should tell Jessica. Would she believe her? She couldn’t stand to be laughed at by Jessica. She’d rather be laughed at by anybody else in the world.

Patty made her shoulders shrug. “I don’t know. Weird, huh?” She’d wait, that’s what she’d do. Wait and see if the Ghost Lady came back to visit Jessica again. Wait until there was no danger of Jessica laughing at her.

Jessica went to the fridge and opened it. She studied its contents.

“Ya’ll don’t have much food in here do you?”

“We never do. Everything good David eats.”

“That’s what boys do, chicken butt. My brothers ate us outta house and home when I was growing up.”

“Really?”

“Damn straight they did. How you think I got to be so scrawny?”

Patty laughed. She would never describe Jessica as scrawny. She was thin, though, and tall, her legs long and graceful in a way that Patty’s would never be.

“Maybe I’ll go out and get us some grub. What does your mom usually eat for breakfast?”

“Nothing, usually.”

Jessica shut the fridge door. She crossed her arms and leaned against the sink, looking hard at Patty.

“Lunch?”

“She’s usually gone at lunch time. Working.”

“Dinner?”

Patty thought about it. It had been a while since Gloria had cooked anything. Lately, she and David had been eating more frozen pizzas and Jiffy-pop than anything else.

“Sometimes she brings home lunch leftovers and heats that up. Or she puts this stuff on a Melba Toast and has it with a bloody Mary.” Patty went to the fridge and showed Jessica the tube of anchovy paste that had lately become one of Gloria’s main food sources.

“That’s it? Anchovy paste on a Melba Toast?” Jessica sat back down on the stool and inspected the crumpled tube. She shook her head, cursing under her breath, unscrewed the top and sniffed it. Instantly, the color drained from her face and she ran to the bathroom and shut the door. Patty picked the tube up off the floor, recapped it and put it away, to the sound of Jessica’s retching from behind the closed door.

The toilet flushed, and Jessica returned, teary-eyed, pulling her copper hair into a loose braid behind her.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll see if I can get her to eat,” Jessica said, her voice raspy. She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Can’t promise nothing, but I’ll try. Right now, I gotta get some air. C’mon, Tops.” Jinx was more than happy to follow Jessica outside. He trotted off to pee on the lilac bushes as she eased herself into a lawn chair.

Patty watched them from the window, sipping her tea. In a little while, she’d heat up Jessica’s tea and bring it out to her. But not right away. She knew that feeling right after throwing up. She wondered if this was what it was like to be pregnant – just everything making you barf all the time. If it was, why did anyone even *want* to be pregnant? And that didn’t even include the part where you swell up like a balloon, and what was supposed to be the worst pain in the whole world of actually having the kid. It all sounded pretty horrible. She wondered if Jessica was scared. She sure would be.

She thought about what David had said about her and wished she could get his voice out of her mind. *She’s just as messed up as everybody else.* Patty didn’t want to believe that. She *wouldn’t* believe it. If Jessica couldn’t help her mom, then nobody could. That was the one thing Patty was pretty sure about.

And she wasn’t sure of much these days.

## Chapter Twelve

The grass of the playing field was still wet from the cold, misty rain of that morning. Patty had been shivering that morning at the bus stop. Now the sun winked in and out between shifting clouds, warming, then chilling the girls on the field, on one the last days of the school year they’d be having gym class outdoors until spring.

Patty was to go last of their team on the third and final round of the relay baton race. She stood behind Annette Bauer, who would be handing her the wooden stick wrapped in plaster tape; once white, now sweat-grimed and fraying. Annette had to get to the far goal, seventy yards down the field and back, in time to hand Patty the stick, then Patty would have to complete the same loop before Mrs. Washerman's stopwatch ran out.

Normally, Patty wouldn't have cared whether she made it or not. Normally, during team sport activities like these, Patty would be looking at the clouds, considering the changes in wind direction, maybe noticing the hopping of a cardinal in the oak tree while her fellow team-mates yelled:

*What's your problem, Lofthaus?*

*Dang, not again! She's hopeless!*

*Who picked her anyway?"*

*She was the last one left – we didn't have any choice. Don't blame me!*

But it was different today. All those shouts were just far away echoes now. Patty leaned forward and gripped her knees, now cool and pink from standing in the line so long. She zeroed in on Annette's form speeding towards her. Annette was kind of heavy, but her big thighs were all muscle, and she was panting hard when she crossed the line. Patty swept the baton out of her hand and was halfway down the field before anyone could say *go*. She was glad this was a sprinting run. She tired out quickly at a jogging pace, and was usually one of the last to finish a lap. She couldn't count how many times it had been just her and three fat girls, puffing and heaving along, while everybody else, long since finished, stood around by the water fountain, pointing and laughing.

Patty swept around the relay marker and looped back. She had four legs instead of two; she was a champion Arabian horse at a rodeo; the best barrel racer in five counties, about to win another blue ribbon. The girls on her team were jumping up and down and screaming as she leapt across the finish line. They parted and made way for her as she shot by them, flinging the baton to the ground just before Mrs. Washerman yelled,

“And...Stop!”

“That was great, Patty,” said Annette. “I can’t believe it. You came in before Kristin Weber!”

Patty looked over at Tammy’s team. Kristin was heaving great breaths, both her hands on her hips and staring at Patty, picking up her feet one at a time, scuffing the ground in front of her like a cat about to pee in a litter box. Tammy was saying something to her, and kept looking over and pointing at Patty. Whatever Tammy was saying was causing her mouth and eyes to stretch open to such a huge size, that Patty couldn’t help laughing, but it made her stomach hurt. She still hadn’t caught her breath. Soon Linda was at her side, having run over from her team, where she had also been the last chosen.

“Did you hear? You guys came in second. Tammy’s team still won, of course, but nobody thought you guys would do that well.”

Patty couldn’t believe how everybody was smiling at her. Could this really be gym class? Was this actually happening? Of course, she’d been lucky. She didn’t have any jocks on her team. Just kind of middle-of-the road girls. Not awful and not great. These weren’t really the girls who hated her; just girls who had never given her a second thought before. Now they were all slapping her on the back and congratulating her.

Winning felt good.

Mrs. Washerman strode over to Patty, stopwatch in hand and pointed to it.

“This is what you can do when you really try, Miss Lofthaus. Good job. Now are you ready for the hundred yard dash?”

The girls groaned. They had almost forgotten class wasn't over yet. There were four track events for the Physical Fitness Award, and they all had to be completed and scores logged in before it got too cold to hold class outside. Mrs. Washerman wasn't going to give them a break.

Tammy and her friends, of course, were jumping up and down in place, giggling and fixing the loose strands of hair back in their ponytails. They jostled for position in the line so they could go as early as possible. Patty stood behind Linda towards the end of the line.

“God, I've never seen them so happy,” said Patty.

Linda leaned towards her to speak in a whisper, “If I can give you some advice, Patty -- be careful. Kristin is going to try to mess you up somehow. She's really mad about the relay race.”

Patty looked over at Kristin. She was talking to Tammy and laughing.

“I don't know, she doesn't look mad to me.”

Linda's glasses were dangling from the cord around her neck she always wore for gym class. She now slipped the glasses on and looked hard at Tammy and Kristin as they prepared for their turns. Kristin seemed to feel their gaze on her and looked directly over at Patty. Her face broke out in a strange grin that Patty couldn't quite read.

“Are you familiar with the ancient Chinese proverb, *beware of the smiling tiger?*” Linda whispered.

But Patty didn't have time to respond, because the first girl was now racing across the field.

One by one they went, until a little bit of the suspense was broken by the repetition. This was just plain old work to Mrs. Washerman. She didn't care that some girls were fighting back the urge to throw up as they got closer and closer to the front of the line. Tammy logged in one of the fastest scores, and was greeted by cheers and hugs from her friends afterwards. Kristin, too, was well within a five-second comfort zone for the Fitness Award, and the jocks seemed to have forgotten all about Patty for the moment.

The next to go up was a quiet, overweight girl named Madeline, who had gone completely pale except for two blazing patches of pink, like twin slaps, on her cheeks. Patty could see the thought sinking into the girl's mind; that she would have to run to that marker while every girl in the entire class had their eyes on her, and Mrs. Washerman timed her on the stopwatch. Patty wanted to take Madeline's hand and pull her away from there to somewhere safe. Why were they all being tortured this way? It was insane. Why was she trying to win this stupid thing?

Barely stifled giggles erupted from Tammy, Kristin and the rest, as they turned to watch this new entertainment. Patty felt something like a fire start in her stomach. The air she exhaled felt hot.

Mrs. Washerman yelled go and Madeline huffed down the field, her feet falling with heavy clumps. She was one of the few girls with actual breasts, and now they were flumping up and down, her round hips rolling under the unforgiving red shorts. Patty almost couldn't bear to watch.

“Hey, maybe they should rename this the one hundred yard elephant dash!”

Tammy said, loud enough for everybody to hear, except for Mrs. Washerman, who had to be going deaf if she couldn't hear it.

“Do you feel an earthquake coming on?” Kristin said, making a big show of trying to keep her balance on shaking earth.

“Vicious imbeciles!” Linda's voice cracked. Her hands were clenched into fists. Mrs. Washerman didn't take her eyes off the stopwatch.

“Well, that would be seven seconds over the limit, Miss – what is it, Whalen?”

Madeline's chin rested nearly on her chest as she shuffled back to her place in line, her back darkened with sweat. Tammy and Kristin stopped trying to contain their giggles and laughed out loud as she slunk away.

“Whalen! Whalen the Whale!”

The fire in Patty's stomach spread now to her chest. She clenched her jaw and struggled to keep quiet. It was Linda's turn now. She handed her glasses to Patty.

“Don't listen to them, Linda. They're idiots.”

Linda jutted her jaw out and turned her black-brown eyes to fix on something far away that only she could see. She took a deep breath and walked to the starting line.

Linda had a way of running where each foot sort of flailed out to the side, rotating outward from the knee. Dorky in the extreme. Patty thought of everything Linda was, a girl who had taught herself to read Egyptian hieroglyphics, who learned foreign languages for fun, who recited Shakespeare, who could draw an entire map of Africa from memory, and get every country right. And all anybody could see at this moment was this silly, awkward body, struggling across the field to reach a stupid wooden stick.

“Woah, now that’s poetry in motion!” said Kristin.

“And it just keeps getting better – look who’s next!”

“Hey, bow-wow. Is it true you live in a tree instead of a house?”

Kristin must have seen something in Patty’s face, because she began laughing hysterically, holding onto Tammy’s arm for support.

Patty positioned herself at the starting line.

“Look at her, she’s so serious. Stupid little freak.”

“Whatsa matter, Lofthaus? You gonna cry? Gonna climb a tree?”

“Go!”

Patty didn’t feel her feet touch the ground. Her legs seemed to grow to twice their length as the end marker rushed towards her. The fire in her stomach spread to her whole body, to her fingertips and toes, flames flying out the soles of her feet. She imagined sending a bolt of lightning to Tammy and Kristin, setting the both on fire. She flew past the finish line, and looped around, and got a good look at the jocks, and they seemed to crumple and shrink, like the witch after Dorothy threw water on her. Linda ran across the field and hugged her. Mrs. Washerman called out her time.

“You, Miss Lofthaus, have made it with a six second margin. Congratulations, again,” she said.

“Did you hear that? Did you hear that?” Linda was shaking her by the shoulders.

“What?” Patty couldn’t hear anything but the pounding of her heart.

“You tied with Tammy! You *beat* Kristin!”

Patty looked over again at the jocks, and the look on their faces was one she’d never seen before. They stood together, arms hanging at their sides, eyes burning into

hers, teeth clenched, silent. There was no mocking, no sneering, just pure, seething hatred. Patty sucked a deep breath of cool air into her lungs, and the fire in her blew out. She laughed, teetering on her feet, a crazy, dizzy, punch-drunk laugh.

“They really *care* about this, don’t they? Those idiots!” she said to Linda, and doubled over laughing again.

Linda looked at her with a classic Linda expression, the quizzical eyebrow arch. “Of course, you goofball. It’s *all* they care about.” Then she lowered her voice and grabbed Patty’s shoulders to steady her. “You’ve just done the worst thing you could possibly do to them. It’s the perfect act of revenge!”

“Dang,” said Patty, shaking her head with wonder. “Maybe they’ll finally leave us alone now.”

Linda smiled and squeezed her hand, but there was worry in her eyes.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

That afternoon, Patty walked home with Johann. She’d been doing that more often, lately. It was so nice to come to his house after school and have his mom there to bring them tea and cake. Patty was amazed at the regularness of it. There was never a time when his mom *wasn’t* there, never a time when there was no cake. In fact, there was always food in their refrigerator. She knew because she made sure to peek into it at least once every time she came over. Without fail, there was always milk, eggs, apples, carrots, sausage, ham, and the most incredible thing of all, individually wrapped slices of Velveeta cheese. If only she could live there.

She told him about what had happened in gym class; he laughed when she described the look on Kristin's face. She told him about Jessica showing up, how she was going to move in with them because her boyfriend was a bum who hit her. He said it was a good thing her mother was doing, and maybe they could find the bum and beat him up together.

“And then, in the morning, Jessica and me were in the kitchen, and she said she thought in the middle of the night that there was a lady watching her through the bedroom door.”

Johann lifted his eyes from the sidewalk.

“The Ghost Lady?”

“Yep. It has to be. Because you know what? That's exactly what she does to me. She doesn't actually come in, she just stands outside the door, with the door open just a crack and looks in.”

“And you actually see her?”

This was the funny thing. The question about seeing her was always hard to answer. Because really, Patty had only actually *seen* her once; that morning after her mom came home with the broken ribs. But in a different way, she saw her almost every day. The other way was a different kind of seeing. Some of it was a waking-up feeling all over her skin, the same feeling when anybody walks into a room, only more like electricity. Some of it was like hearing a new rhythm in the air, like somebody else's breath other than her own. Some of it was almost like smelling, but not exactly. But when she looked with her eyes at the place where it was coming from, the only thing she actually *saw* was a difference in the air. A spot where it was concentrated, thicker, or

sometimes kind of sparkly. She tried to explain all this to Johann. After a while he interrupted her.

“I think I know what you mean,” he said. “See, the problem they have is that it’s difficult for them to appear. It takes a lot of force for them to come through into this world, so usually only part of them makes it. That’s why not everybody can see them. Especially grownups, because they’re usually not paying attention. They’re thinking about something else.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I told you. Our housekeeper. Penelope. She knew everything about ghosts.”

Of course. The Zulu housekeeper. Patty had forgotten about Penelope. Penelope could be very useful right about now.

“What we need to do is a séance,” Johann said.

“A séance? How do you even *do* a séance?”

“Easy! All you need are some candles, and it has to be at night, and no grownups around, or anybody who might laugh, or the spell will be ruined. And then we ask the ghost what she wants. Why is she spying on everybody in the house? Why is she walking up and down the stairs? Why hasn’t she gone to the Spirit World where she belongs, because Penelope said when they won’t stay in the Spirit World, it’s because something is wrong, and they aren’t ready to go yet.”

“So we need to find out what’s wrong? Why she won’t leave?”

“Exactly.”

While Johann’s mother served them tea, he talked her into driving them both over to Patty’s house. It was still light out when they arrived, but nobody but David was home,

and he was shut up in his room, so they were in luck. They grabbed the candles from the dining room table and went upstairs to Patty's room to make their plan. It was hard to be patient and wait until dark, so when the sun was going down, they decided to get into the attic early before anyone else came home. It would work best if nobody knew they were even there. They'd have to be quiet.

They creaked up the attic stairs, Patty leading the way, Johann carrying the candles and matches. Patty paused at the top step, looked around, felt the air. There was no sign of her. It was warm and woody smelling, a beam of orange from the setting sun slanting in through the window at the far end, specks of dust glittering in its path.

"So, this is where she lives, eh?" Johann half-whispered behind her. He walked over to the chair and table that Patty had arranged next to the curtains hanging from the clothes line. He complimented her on the pretend parlor, then looked out the tiny window to the yard below. The sun had sunk below the line of trees marking the railroad tracks.

"D'y think it's dark enough yet?" he asked.

"I don't know. You're the séance expert," Patty said. She made a little space on the floor for them, with two old couch cushions and the candles, in their holders, set in the center. She wondered if she was setting it up right.

Johann watched her, tipping the rocking chair back and forth, then sat down on one of the cushions on the floor. As Patty fiddled with the candles, he picked absently a scab on his ankle.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"Nope. You?"

"No...just wondering, you know."

“Wondering what?”

“What to ask her. What to say to her.”

Patty looked up at him. She had that feeling again, like he was pulling something from inside of her, unraveling her. She looked at the row of tiny blonde hairs on the back of his neck and wondered if they were as soft as they looked. She watched him light the candles. He was better with matches than she was. He blew the match out and asked if there were an ashtray.

“I thought about that, but I decided not to put one here, because, like, what if she smokes? She could start a fire, right?”

Johann nodded, as if this made total sense, and put the burnt match in his pocket.

“I just don’t know how I feel about her anymore,” Patty said. “I don’t know whether I want her to stay or to go. She isn’t *bad*. At least, I haven’t seen her do anything really bad. But she’s scary. You know? And she’s getting louder. And not so afraid to come out, like she was before. So she gets less afraid, and that makes me *more* afraid, even though I don’t even know what I’m afraid of. Do I sound totally stupid?”

“No, not at all.”

And she knew he really meant it, because of the look on his face, and she knew then, that even more than Linda, even more than David, or anyone, he could see all the different parts of her. Or almost all. And so far, nothing about her was stupid to him. He had never laughed at her, not once. And all the time, he was pulling that string out of the middle of her chest; she was like a knitted scarf coming undone. And it hurt and it felt wonderful all at the same time.

*I can’t believe I used to think he was funny-looking.*

“Sometimes when I walk into a room, I swear, it’s like she was just in there, and left, like the second before I walk in.”

Johann nodded.

It was now getting dark for real. Johann’s face didn’t look so totally white in the candlelight.

“I think we need to ask her what she wants,” he said. “It’s the only way you’ll find out. Otherwise, she might just try to take it. Whatever it is.”

Johann pulled a pen out of his back pocket and asked for a piece of paper. Patty found some yellowed stationary from a box in the corner and handed it to him. She shook his head, and handed the pen to Patty.

“We’re going to ask the Ghost Lady to write through you.”

“To do what?”

“To use your hand to write what she wants to tell us. But to do this, you have to be completely relaxed. Don’t think about it. It has to come from her.”

Patty looked at the paper and pen like they were brand new tools she’d never seen. She asked Johann if he’d ever done this before, and he said no, but he’d read about it in a book, and how hard could it be?

They sat for a long time before anything happened. A million years, it felt like. The candle dripped wax on the floor and she and Johann crossed and uncrossed their legs about eight times as their feet fell asleep one after another. Every once in a while Johann would ask a question to the darkness:

“Why are you here? What do you want?”

Patty tried not to change positions so much, because it felt like that was breaking up the concentration, but every part of her seemed to be getting stiff and itching and needing to be shifted. She was just about to tell Johann they'd better give up when something happened.

Her arm felt heavy. The hand holding the pen felt squeezed by the weight, pressing down now on the paper. Then, in a rightward-slanted handwriting that looked like her aunt's from Iowa, the hand wrote –

*Sweet Lorraine*

Johann leaned over to see, his forehead nearly touching hers. Patty realized she had forgotten to breathe. She inhaled slowly, listening to her heart pound, afraid to speak. She didn't want to look up, afraid it would stop whatever was happening.

“What do you mean? Who's Lorraine? Do you have something to say to us?” Johann was trying to control his voice shaking. The candle flames danced. When the pen moved again, it moved much faster than before, in the same elongated, flowing handwriting.

*She is in danger*

Patty's heart pounded against her ribs. The letters were sure, and impossible to mistake.

“Who's Lorraine?” Johann said again.

“My dad's girlfriend,” Patty said.

Johann's stared at her with huge eyes.

“Are you serious?” he whispered.

Patty nodded.

Johann peered harder into the darkening room and asked again, “Why do you stay? Why are you spying on people in this house? Why don’t you want to go to the Spirit World?” He was clutching his ankles with both hands, his knees drawn up to his chest, like he was cold, and suddenly Patty realized it *was* cold. All the warmth that had collected under the roof all day was gone. Her arms broke out in goosebumps. She felt the electricity in the air, the watching feeling, and wanted badly to turn around, but that would break up the concentration. Then a bumping crash behind her made them both jump.

A box in the corner that had been stacked on top of two others had toppled over, its contents spilling out onto the floor -- paper, cards, envelopes, stationary boxes.

They both got up at the same time, Johann practically knocking the candles over. They gathered up the papers.

“You think she did that?” Johann said.

“Definitely.” Johann pulled a few things out of the pile and brought them over to the candle to look at.

Patty put the last few things in the box, an envelope full of old receipts, a notebook full of shopping lists, a bundle of old pens bound by a stiff rubber band.

“What do you know about this stuff?” Johann asked.

“It’s theirs. My family would never keep stuff like this,” she said.

“Theirs? Whose?”

“The people whose house this was before us. They left a bunch of boxes they still haven’t picked up.”

Johann handed her a garden supply catalog, a program for an elementary school Christmas pageant from 1948, a ragged tourist brochure welcoming them to Historic New Glarus, Wisconsin, a black and white photograph of a couple about the age of Patty's parents, smiling, with their arms around each other, standing in front of a sign on a brick wall: *Nat King Cole Live at the Blue Note*.

"Wow, this is old," said Patty. The woman's hairdo was like something from a World War II movie.

"Why did they leave all this stuff here?" Johann asked. "Didn't they want it?"

Patty looked around the attic. The corners had grown very dark outside their little circle of candlelight. The warmth was starting to creep back into the room. Was it really that much stuff? Only about five boxes, at the most.

"I don't know," said Patty. "Maybe they forgot it was even here. You should have seen how much stuff they moved out. It was way, way, *way* more than we moved in."

Johann huddled close to her side, looking at the papers and pictures with her. Downstairs, something thumped. Patty's heart sank.

"My mom's home."

Not just home, already in her bedroom, which meant there was no way they were getting out of there without her knowing.

"Is she looking for you? Should we tell her where we are?"

"No!"

Johann stared at her, seemed to be about to say something, then closed his mouth. It was useless to try to continue the séance. Everything had been messed up by Gloria

coming home. It would be impossible to concentrate now. Johann took the pile of stuff from Patty's hands.

"Do you think this stuff belongs to the Ghost Lady?" he asked.

"Well, it makes sense, yeah. But who *is* she? Both of them are alive – Bob and Ida, the ones that lived here. He was the one who built the house, so it can't be anyone who lived here before him. There *wasn't* any house before him."

Johann squinted at the note. He couldn't come up with anything, either. Patty looked at the strange handwriting she'd written, or *her hand* had written, wondering if she could ever write that way again. It was so different from her own handwriting. Writing backwards would be easier.

*She is in danger.*

*Sweet Lorraine.*

"She's saying something is going to happen to my dad's girlfriend."

"That's what it sounds like," said Johann.

"But how would she know my dad even *had* a girlfriend?"

They both thought about this. Meanwhile, more bumps, mumbles, scrapes and footsteps from downstairs. Gloria sure made a lot of noise for one person.

"You know I... I told my mum I'd be home for dinner," Johann said.

"Yeah, okay." Patty thought about it. After all, they couldn't stay up there forever, Gloria or no Gloria. Maybe if they were very, very quiet. Patty gathered the candles and sent Johann down the stairs before her.

"After you push open the first door, you see two more doors. Open the door on the right. Try not to make any noise," she whispered.

If they went straight to Patty's bedroom one at a time, they might escape Gloria's notice.

Johann slipped down the stairs, pushed open the attic door, then reached for the next knob.

"Wrong door!" Patty said. Too late. Empty brandy bottles jangled and rolled across the floor. Gloria's hoot of surprise bounced across the room.

"Sorry, Mrs. Lofthaus – I didn't mean to disturb you." He pulled the door shut.

"I said the *right* door!"

"That *was* the right door!"

Patty stopped and did what she always did when this happened: reached for the raised mole that she knew was on her left hip, right above her beltline. The only way she knew for sure which way was left. There it was. He was right.

"Dang. Sorry." The door to Gloria's room swung open again, and there she was in the doorway, already in her tattered nightgown with the coffee stains, no bra.

"What are you kids doing? Patty, why didn't you tell me you had a friend over?"

Her voice made Patty wince; that mushy, murky smear of words, too loud and too soft in all the wrong places, like she had no idea how to control the volume knob of it.

Patty opened the door of her room, shoved Johann through it, slipped in after him and shut it behind them. Johann's eyebrows bunched into a knot as he looked from Patty to the closed door, back to Patty again.

"Why don't you answer her?"

"I don't know."

"She doesn't sound cross or anything."

“Whatever. It doesn’t matter.” Patty went to go turn on the stereo.

“Were those liquor bottles on the floor? I almost tripped over them. There must have been six or seven at least. Why does your mother—?”

“I said *forget it*, okay? What are you, deaf or something?”

Johann let his mouth hang open for a couple of seconds then closed it tightly, straightening a bit. “You know it’s nothing to be ashamed of,” he said.

“*What’s* nothing to be ashamed of?”

“If your mother drinks. If she drinks too much. It’s not your fault, is it?”

“Who said I was ashamed of *anything*? And what makes you think she’s a drunk?”

“I didn’t *say* she was a drunk.”

“Well, whatever you said, it’s none of your business, anyway.”

“Why are you angry with me? What did I do?”

“Oh, *nothing!* You never do *anything* wrong! You and your perfect family, and your perfect mom with her tea and her cake and your totally clean house that smells like flowers.” Patty’s voice was cracking. She sounded almost as bad as Gloria. She hated the sound of it. She hated Johann seeing her like this. She hated herself and her stupid house and the stupid world. She crouched down and rifled through her record albums, forgetting for the moment that Johann had said he needed to get home.

The only sound was the TV set coming on in the other room, Walter Cronkite’s voice saying something about Argentina.

“My perfect family? My *perfect* family? If you... If you only knew.”

Patty stopped rifling and looked up. Johann's cheeks were burning pink. He looked like he wanted to scream, but his voice was quieter than ever. Somehow that made it worse. He crossed his arms in front of his chest, turned away and looked out the window.

"Only knew what?" Patty stood up.

"Never mind. You wouldn't understand." His voice had iced over. His chin tilted up, his lips a thin line. He wasn't with her anymore. He wasn't even looking at her.

"Why? Am I too stupid?"

"I didn't say that." His voice darkened, down into the danger zone.

"Why not? Everybody else does."

"If you were stupid, I wouldn't be your friend."

"Yeah? Well, I don't know why you *are*. I can't even tell left from right. Maybe I'm brain damaged from my drunk mother."

He turned around, finally looking in her eyes again, his hands balled into fists. "There's a big difference between getting confused about numbers and directions and being stupid! And if you can't figure that out, then you're, you're just..."

"Stupid?"

Johann's face was entirely red now. He pushed her backwards sharply, drawing back the instant he did it, like he was trying to take it back too late. "If you weren't a girl, I'd sock you!"

They stared at each other, Patty still clutching the paper with the weird handwriting in one hand. A commercial for Doublemint gum drifted in from Gloria's

room, the sound of her pushing things around, her voice saying, “where’s the goddamned phone?”

“I have to go home,” he said. He pushed past her and out the door.

She followed him down the stairs. Jinx got up from his spot by the window and trotted and wagged after them, hoping that wherever they were going, he was going, too.

“Aren’t you gonna call your mom for a ride?”

“I’ll take the bus.”

She almost followed him. Almost asked if she could wait with him for the bus. Almost said she was sorry, and wait, please, please don’t go yet. All of this got stuck in her throat like a fish bone, and in the end she just stood there and watched him close the door behind him. Out the darkened windows, his blonde head caught the street light and wavered out of sight. For a long time, Patty didn’t move. After a while, she realized where she was standing. In the Ghost Lady’s spot. The spot where she always waited.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

Patty hardly ate anything that night and went to bed early. The thought of Johann not wanting to be her friend anymore was just about the worst feeling she’d ever felt. Worse than the night her parents told them they were getting divorced. Worse than throwing up all day from the flu. How had it even happened? How had they gone from the two of them, in the circle of candlelight, trying to talk to Ghost Lady to yelling at each other? Where was the moment where everything went crazy?

It was Gloria. Her liquor bottles. He had almost tripped over them. He actually saw the inside of her room. Her boobs flapping around inside that awful, stained nightgown. The thought of it made Patty want to take a six-hour long shower. Not even that would wash off the horrible, dirty feeling of it.

Why couldn't there be just one part of her life that was okay? Johann had been that part, but of course, it had been too good to be true. Just like everything else. She pulled the covers up over her head and cried until she had to turn her pillow over. It was getting too wet.

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“Is that all you're eating for breakfast?”

Patty's mom was watching out of the corner of her eye as Patty left a half-eaten slice of peanut butter toast on the plate. Patty shoved her books into her backpack, not looking up.

“Well?”

“So? How about you? When's the last time you even ate breakfast?” Patty slung the bag over her shoulder and headed for the door. She had five minutes to make the bus.

“I've had just about enough of that smart mouth of yours, missy!”

“Sorry. Sorry for talking. Sorry for eating. Sorry for not eating. Sorry for breathing. Sorry I was born – okay?”

“Just what is your problem? You want to tell me?”

“Sure, if you want me to be late for school and get detention again, but then you said you don't want to see any more notes from school, right? So again, *So-ree!*” Patty

shut the door behind her, but Gloria opened it again, and yelled down the walk, loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear:

“We’re talking about this when you get home, do you hear me?”

Yeah, whatever, Patty thought. If you remember. If you aren’t too drunk by then.

As soon as Patty saw the bus coming she was ready to start crying again. Of course, Johann wouldn’t be waiting for her at the bus stop, not after she’d acted last night. He’d probably never want to walk with her again after that little scene. Then there would be the horrible awkwardness of passing each other in the hallways. How was she supposed to act? And now she’d have to figure out this whole Ghost Lady business on her own.

She threw her bag on the seat next to her so nobody else would try to sit there. If only she could have the whole world to herself. But as the bus turned up the drive along the creek, there was Johann, in his usual place, waiting for her to get off the bus to walk with him to school the last six blocks. At first, she thought her eyes were tricking her, but there was no mistaking that white-blond hair. Her heart was pounding as she grabbed her things and jumped out just before the bus doors closed.

“What’s the matter with you today? Are you sick?” Johann asked. He was clutching his book bag tighter than usual, his knuckles white around the strap. But he didn’t seem mad. Not exactly.

“So...you don’t hate me?” she asked.

“No. Do you hate *me*?”

“No.”

Without another word, they began walking. Was it really that easy? Was he really not upset anymore at all? She kept sneaking looks at him, but he looked as normal as ever, staring at the sidewalk intently as usual. Finally, she decided to take his word for it, and joined him in looking at the sidewalk in front of her as she walked, trying not to step on the cracks.

*Step on a crack, break your mother's back. Only I bet mine could break her own back without my help,* she thought. Johann spoke again.

"I'm sorry I got angry last night."

"It's okay."

"It's just...you were saying some things. Like about being stupid. You're not, you know."

"I know," Patty was surprised to hear herself saying. In the silence that followed, she realized that she owed him some kind of explanation. What had he gone home thinking? About her mother?

"She's not...My mom, I mean – it's not like she's drunk all the time, or anything."

"Oh, well, right."

"I mean, she goes out and works and stuff. I mean, when she *has* work, and she's actually a pretty nice person, I mean--"

"Patty, it's okay. It really, really is." He stopped now, on the sidewalk in front of her, looking at her in a way that made the world stop. She grabbed the straps of her backpack tighter.

"Don't tell them," she almost whispered. "Linda and Heidi. Please?"

Johann's eyebrows popped up. "About...what, exactly?"

"You know. The booze bottles. They...they don't know. About my mom, really."

Johann nodded once, like a tiny bow, in a way that made him seem twenty-five years old in one second. "I won't say anything. I promise." His voice was firm and calm. He smiled a crooked little smile and kept walking. "Believe me, I'm good at keeping secrets," he said over his shoulder as the school loomed into view.

*If you only knew...*

What was it he had almost told her last night? She was just about to ask him when Heidi jumped out of the bus in front of them and bounded over, waving a new copy of Sci-fi Digest magazine.

"Woo-hoo!! The review of the new Star Wars movie!!" she called out. The rest of what she had to say was drowned out by the bell ringing, and they all had to run to class to avoid the hall monitors.

The next time it occurred to her to ask him was between English and Science class, as they were both heading to their lockers, but Johann knocked the question out of her mind as he leapt up and grabbed his binder and slammed his locker door shut before the total wreckage inside came flying out. He was good at that particular maneuver.

"You know, you've got to figure out what kind of danger your dad's girlfriend is in." He snapped the combination lock shut and spun its little dial. "Lorraine. I mean, that's what the Ghost Lady was saying, wasn't she?"

Patty looked around quickly to make sure nobody was eavesdropping.

"Yeah, it sure seems that way."

“Well, this part is up to you, then. I’ve been thinking about it. I don’t know this Lorraine, but you do. You’ve got to try to piece it together. Think about anything that could possibly harm her.”

“But none of it makes sense – I mean, if she’s worried about Lorraine, why wouldn’t the Ghost Lady be in Lorraine’s house?”

“Ghosts don’t always make sense, Patty. I’m just saying – only you can figure out this next part. I don’t know anything about her.”

“But I can ask you for advice, right?”

“Of course.” He swung the binder at her in slow motion, pretending to whack her over the head with it, then ran off to his science class, the one with the cool lab. Patty watched him go, sighed and headed off to her lame science class, the one with the stinky aquariums full of minnows, blue-green algae, and paramecia. But apparently, she wasn’t moving fast enough.

“Yo, Lofthaus! Is that your face, or a dog’s butt?”

Her stomach wrenched itself into a knot.

Eric Pitt.

“Oh, and look at that sweater – golly! Attention K-Mart shoppers! Clearance sale in aisle four!”

Kristin Weber.

“Off to the retard science class, Lofthaus? Did you tell them all your big plans to get the PPFA?”

Then she made the deadly mistake. Forgetting to ignore them, she turned around and asked,

“The PPFA?”

Eric and Kristin’s mouths flew open and they gaped at each other with utter amazed delight. Kristin actually squealed.

“You don’t even *know*? Duh – it’s only the Presidential Physical Fitness Award!” and the two of them fell on each other’s shoulders laughing like it was the funniest thing they had ever witnessed in the entire universe.

“Morons,” Patty muttered to herself and hurried off to class, her face on fire.

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That night, she dreamed that Larry and Eric were at the bottom of the tree again, looking up at her, laughing.

*“You’re freaks! All you Lofthouses are freaks!”*

But this time, each branch that Patty perched on broke beneath her, one by one. She was falling down, down, and soon they would have her. She clung to the trunk of the tree, the only part of it that was solid. Down below, Larry and Eric had started a fire with the dead branches. It was burning higher and higher. The bottom branches caught fire. The smoke reached Patty, the flames licking the bottoms of her bare feet, as the boys laughed and laughed on the ground below.

*Dog! Ugly, stupid dog in a tree!*

Patty woke up to cold in her room. Way too cold for October. The fire and smoke were gone, but the laughter was still there. It was coming through the window, from the yard below, mixed with Jinx’s frantic barks.

“Man, I wish I knew which one was her bedroom window – I’d throw a rock at it!”

“Here, pass it over this way!”

The room was freezing. Her front curtains were billowing, but the window was barely open a crack. A shimmering blue light hung in the air in front of the window. The curtains flew backward, and the light went icy white.

It wasn’t from the streetlight.

Patty pulled the covers up to her chin as one side of the curtain pulled taut until the curtain rod flipped off its hooks and clattered to the ground. The air suddenly went tight, heavy with silence, like that moment right after a baby falls on its face; the silence right before it starts screaming.

Patty forced her feet onto the freezing floor and ran to the window to pick up the curtain rod. Outside, something white flew past her window. At first she thought it was a pigeon, but a trail of something followed it. Another thing just like it flew from the other direction. She heard girls giggling on the lawn.

“She’s gonna be sorry she was ever born, the little shithead!”

Tammy Schmidt’s voice.

Patty’s stomach give such a lurch she thought she might actually vomit. The horrible, crossed reality of being in her very own bedroom, and hearing Tammy’s nightmare of a voice so close, while she stood there in her pajamas.

The ones with the hole in the butt.

She climbed up on her desk, hands shaking violently, and put the curtains back up, careful to stand to the side, so she couldn’t be seen from outside. Her fingers could

barely get the rod back into the little hooks. Could they see in? She didn't know. She just wanted something, *anything* between her and them. How had they found out where she lived?

Stupid. Larry and Eric, of course. They had probably seen her or David walking into the house after school one day.

Finally she got the curtain back up and saw the white thing pass again. It was a roll of toilet paper. The yard below was crisscrossed with white ribbons of it, the bittersweet bushes in front of the house; the Japanese maple, Jessica's car.

Jessica's car.

Patty's heart pounded harder, but that *thing* was shifting again inside. She could feel it. Fear was giving way to something else, as she saw Larry and Kristen make a running loop around the little green car, tossing the toilet paper roll between them, wrapping the frame of it in a damp, wadded mess.

She could throw something at them. Her wastebasket, maybe. Or at least yell at them.

Patty's fingers, practically numb, now struggled to open the window, yanking hard on it – it always had been hard to open. She gritted her teeth as the icy blue light turned her hands a moonish silvery color in front of her eyes. As soon as she got the window open, the curtains flew out into the open air as if a wind were blowing from inside her room. The air outside felt warm as bathwater by comparison. She covered her head, expecting the curtain rod to fall again, but it hung on, as the curtains billowed from the window like a flying flag, lit up by the freezing cold blue light. Jinx's barking was hysterical now, and suddenly another voice cut through the cruel laughter down below.

“What the hell is going on out here, for Chrissake?”

Gloria.

For a moment, all motion on the lawn ceased. Patty could almost see their faces, but not quite. Larry and Eric seemed about to run for it.

“I said, what the hell are you kids doing out here? You little shits... I mean, whuh... whut the...? Look at my tree! What have you...”

Patty turned and ran out of the room and down the stairs. She had to get Gloria back inside. The living room was dark. She tripped over Jinx as he ran in circles around her feet.

“You kids better get the hell off my lawn before I--” A crash interrupted and Gloria’s speech turned into a wail followed by a string of loud cursing.

“Ow! My shin! Goddamn it, I’ll kill you little shits!”

Patty squeezed her eyes shut, put her hands over her ears, but she heard it, anyway. Tammy and Kristin were laughing. Eric and Larry joined in. In one second, their fear of being caught had turned to delight at one more thing they could ridicule.

Patty Lofthaus’s drunk mother.

Patty remained on the living room floor, her hands over her ears, wishing she were dead. With both Patty and Gloria on the ground, Jinx had no choice but to fling himself at the window, barking hysterically. Patty scrambled to her feet just as it looked like he might actually break through it. Suddenly the laughter stopped.

“What the hell is that up there?” Larry was pointing up from the driveway at the second floor. Out the window, Patty could see their faces, lit up in the strange blue light

from her bedroom. A crash from upstairs. Tammy and Kristin screamed. Something huge flew down from above and onto the lawn and all four of them turned and ran.

Patty held Jinx back as she opened the front door, but he yanked his head out of his collar and took off after Tammy, Kristin, Larry and Eric, barking and snarling. Their screams echoed down the street followed by the skitter of Jinx's toenails.

"Lucky for them they're all track stars," said David's voice behind her.

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked.

"I was sleeping. Is that okay with you?"

He walked past her to where Gloria was struggling to disentangle herself from a bush. He grabbed her by one arm. A brandy bottle rolled out from under her, trickling brown liquid. Patty winced. Had she actually gone out there with a bottle in her hand? Please, God, no.

"Come on, Mom, let's get inside," said David.

"Ow! I'm bleeding!"

Patty caught a whiff of the air around Gloria and felt sick.

Jessica was next to appear on the stoop. The *stoep*.

"What's going on, you guys? Oh, my God - did ya'll see this? Who made this mess?"

"Uh...you might not want to look at your car, Jessica," said David.

"What the hell..?"

"Damn this hurts...Gloria rubbed her shin, teetering to the side. David held her up. "The li'l bastards. Look at my leg! Were those friends of yours, Patty?"

"Friends? Are you out of your mind? *Friends?*"

“Give your mom a break, kid.”

“For your information, *my friends* would never do something like this to me! Why don’t you mind your own business?” Why couldn’t *everybody* just mind their own business?

Patty ran out into the yard and began tearing the streamers of toilet paper off the bittersweet bushes. The flimsy paper ripped and wadded up in her hands. She used some of it to blow her nose and wipe the tears off her face. She wanted to be dead. She wanted to bury herself in a hole and not come out, ever.

“You...you need to get rid of that attitude...you...you...you hear me?” Gloria yelled in her general direction, as David and Jessica pulled her inside. Porch lights were coming on from the houses around them. Oh, to be dead. Six feet underground. Under the cool, black soil. Never to come up again. The stupid toilet paper kept fraying off and shredding as she yanked it from the branches.

“They didn’t even use *good* toilet paper. With all their money. Would it have killed them to use Charmin?”

Patty managed to get a grip on one long piece and stepped back with it, wrapping it around her arm, when she nearly fell backwards over a chunk of something in the yard. She regained her balance and turned to look at it.

It was her bedroom window. Not just the glass; the entire thing, frame and all. Glass shards like giant kitchen knives reflected streetlight, wedges of grass poking up between them. That was what had flown down from above and scared the jocks away.

She looked up. Her bedroom curtains were fluttering in the breeze through the now gaping window, illuminated by the lightbulb still on inside her room. The light just normal now. The weird blue was gone.

What would have happened if Tammy and Kristin had been right under it? What if they hadn't been fast enough to get out of the way?

Patty felt weak suddenly. Weak and sick. And then she wasn't standing anymore, but crouching in the grass, her arms filled with mounds of toilet paper, staring at the destroyed window, shivering in the chilly breeze.

She had never thought before that the Ghost Lady could actually hurt someone. And it *had* been the Ghost Lady, hadn't it? There was no doubt about it. That same icy blue light still seemed to glint a little at the edges of the broken glass, shards that could cut like razors, make blood flow.

"What's that thing on the ground?" It was David, fully dressed now.

He stood behind her and carefully nosed a plate of broken glass with the toe of his sneaker. He looked up and saw where it had fallen from.

"Why didn't you say something if your bedroom window was loose? Did it fall out when you tried to open it, or what?"

Patty sniffed and took a deep breath.

"Yeah, that musta been what happened."

"Well, it coulda killed somebody, man. Say something next time, okay? I mean, I know the house is old and there's a lot wrong with it, but some stuff has to be fixed, or it's...you know, dangerous." He bent down and began picking up the bigger pieces of

glass, stacking them like plates in the palm of his hand. She helped him, the two of them making a deadly pile, leaving the frame a broken-toothed rectangle in the grass.

“Not that I woulda cried or anything if it had killed those little morons I mean,” David added. Patty tried to laugh, but it was a sad, mutated, half-crying laugh.

It was after 1:00 am when Patty finally went to sleep. Jessica had to help Gloria get to bed, and then she and David cut up some Hefty bags to make a temporary window for Patty. Now duct tape lined the edges of the sill in ugly patches. The breeze crinkled the plastic and puffed it in and out in sad, wheezy breaths. It was just for a little while, until they could get a new window.

The Ghost Lady was quiet for the night, probably tired out, Patty figured. It was hard to get used to the noises of the plastic bag window, but she finally slipped into strange dreams until about 4:00 am, when Jinx’s barking woke her up again. From the amount of mud caked on his paws, Patty could only guess how far he’d chased them.

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The next morning, Patty almost didn’t get out of bed. She thought about pretending to be sick and staying home from school, but there was no way Gloria would believe her. She didn’t have a fever, and although she’d heard about people making themselves throw up, she was scared to actually try it.

There were still scraps of toilet paper clinging to the eaves of the house, and fluttering in the branches of the Japanese maple as she left the house. She tried not to look at them. They were too high up to reach. As the bus carried her closer and closer to school, her stomach began to hurt for real.

## Chapter Fifteen

“What’s the matter? You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“You always have the nicest things to say when I get off the bus, don’t you?”

“You’re face is so white, it’s practically green, Patty,” said Johann. “What happened? Did the Ghost Lady give you trouble last night?”

Patty looked at him. They were three blocks from school. This was the last chance to tell him, or she’d have to wait until the end of the day. She didn’t want to talk about it at the lunch table where the jocks could overhear.

She didn’t want to talk about it at all.

But Johann had that look, that look that said he already knew something had happened and would figure it out soon enough, whether she told him or not.

“The jocks toilet papered my yard last night.”

“They did *what?*”

Patty sighed. Another stupid American thing she would have to explain to him.

“They took rolls of toilet paper and unrolled them, getting it all over the trees, the bushes, the grass, Jessica’s car. They used, like three rolls.”

Johann wrinkled his nose and shook his head. “Bloody stupid waste of toilet paper.”

“Is that all you have to say? You’re worried about the *toilet paper?*”

“No, I mean – how did they even know where you live, anyway?”

“Larry and Eric know. They hate me. Ever since David chased them off the basketball court at the park across the street.”

“Well, then they’re a bunch of cowardly bastards. Your brother scares them off, and then they come in the night and litter your garden. Stupid babies. Did you catch them at it?”

“That’s the thing. *I* didn’t catch them. It was the Ghost Lady.”

Johann grabbed her shoulders and stared at her. He didn’t blink until a bumble bee nearly flew into his eye, probably mistaking it for blue flower. A morning-glory, maybe.

“What do you mean, the Ghost Lady caught them? Caught them *how*?”

She told him the whole story. In the end, it made them both late for school. She had to include the part about Gloria staggering out onto the lawn with the bottle. There was no way she was going to let him hear it from the jocks first.

“So now I got three problems,” Patty counted them off on her fingers for him, “One; the jocks hate me worse than ever. Two; they know my mom is a drunk now, and you think they’re gonna keep *that* to themselves? Three; the Ghost Lady almost killed them.”

“Actually, that third one doesn’t seem so much of a problem—”

“Dang, Johann! *Think* about it -- I got a ghost that tries to *kill* people now! I bet you wouldn’t think it was so cool if *you* had to live with her. You gotta see what she did to my window. If you were there last night, you wouldn’t--”

“Alright, alright. Forget it! I take it back. So, what do we do?”

“What do *we* do?”

“Yes, *we*. You can’t expect to solve all of this on your own, can you?”

From the other side of the hill the school bell rang. Homeroom doors were shutting, now; hall monitors pulling out their pads of late slips for people like Patty and Johann, slinking in late.

“Just yesterday, weren’t you telling me I was on my own with this?”

“That was when it was about what’s her name – Laurel.”

“Lorraine.”

“Whatever – this is a lot more serious now. Let’s talk about it after school, okay?”

“You mean, after detention?”

“Whatever.”

First period, and then second period came and went without incident, and Patty started to wonder what was going on. Her palms were sweating and her mouth was dry as she stood in the lunch line, even though she was starving. She could see Linda and Heidi were already seated at the geek table, each buried in books. The jocks were nowhere to be seen. Nobody had yelled an insult at her all day. No taunting as she stood at her locker, no spitballs or chewed gum tossed in her direction in the hallways; nothing. Maybe they were in hiding, planning something truly horrible for her. She looked around for Johann and spotted him further back in the line. He ran up and slipped into line in front of her.

“Did you get detention?” he asked.

“What do you think?”

He smiled. “I’ll see you there, I guess.”

“Any trouble from the enemy?” he asked.

Patty looked up and down the line.

“Nope. And it’s weird.”

“Maybe they all skipped school. Maybe your dog caught up with them and they’re all in the hospital.”

“I wish.”

Lunch was pizza burgers, Patty’s favorite, but she ate absently, looking over her shoulder the whole time. Heidi chewed her same old peanut butter sandwich on Wonder Bread that her mom had made for her every day since the beginning of time. Between bites she read to them from her fan magazine. In the last week her whole life had become Star Wars, Star Wars, Star Wars.

*“From this moment forward, the science fiction movie will never be the same. George Lucas is going to change the world.”* She took a swig of milk. “Why do movies take so long to get here? It’s been playing in New York since Friday. *Friday!* The day it opens, I swear, the first day, we’re all going. We’ll all sit in the front row together.” She took another bite, then finally looked up.

“Earth to Patty?” She waved a jelly-stained hand in front of Patty’s face.

“Yeah, absolutely. The day it opens.”

Linda looked up from her book, *The Legend of Gilgamesh -- Illustrated*, and made a concerned face.

“Patty? Is something wrong?”

Patty looked at Johann. Johann shrugged, as if to say *it’s your call*. She took a deep breath.

“Okay, guys – it’s about last night.”

Patty told them the toilet-papering, leaving out the part about her mom staggering out the door, drunk. She spoke in as quiet a voice as she could, and still be heard over the

racket in the lunch room. Linda had to ask her to repeat herself several times and was clearly growing annoyed with having to do so.

“I don’t get it,” Heidi interrupted, “You mean you were *downstairs* when your window fell out? How?”

“Patty seems to have some strange going-on in her house,” said Linda. “Although I’m still not convinced it’s anything paranormal,” she added with a glance at Patty.

“Remember when she told us about the noises in the attic at night?”

“Noises in the attic don’t push windows out of their frames,” said Heidi. “Maybe you did it with your *mind*. Telekinesis -- like in the movie *Carrie*. Did you read the book? I saw *Carrie* six times and read the book three times. The book is even better. I’ve read everything by Stephen King, and that one is definitely one of the--”

“Heidi...” Linda took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes, “Please shut up.”

“Yah,” said Johann, “Can’t you see that Patty has a problem?”

“Sure she does,” said Heidi. “She needs to learn to control her telekinetic powers and use them only for good, like that one race of beings in that Star Trek episode where--”

“Dang it, Heidi! If I *had* telekinetic powers, I’d use them to set Tammy Schmidt’s hair on fire. And you woulda seen it already!”

“*That* would be cool,” Johann admitted.

Suddenly, Linda looked up and shushed them. Patty was afraid to turn around. She didn’t have to. Before she could breathe, there was Larry’s head leaning over her shoulder. She could smell the pizza burger on his tray.

“I heard your house got some new décor last night. That true, Lofthaus?”

Patty poked at the peas on her tray with her spork. The tiny tines on the hybrid utensil – half spoon and half fork – weren't long enough to spear them. She considered catapulting them into Larry's face, but she'd probably just hit her own. She wasn't much good at pea catapulting.

“Don't bother pretending that you had nothing to do with it,” said Linda. Her fingers clutched around the spine of her book, and her eyes flickered up at Larry's briefly. Patty could see how much it cost her to do even that. Larry was a lot bigger than her. Patty tried to shoot Linda a silent *thanks*, but she had already reopened her book and disappeared into it. Larry ignored her. His target was Patty.

“Your mom ever find her way out of that bush?”

“I'd stick with the hot lunch, if I was you, Lofthaus.” It was Eric's voice this time, right behind Larry. Patty still wasn't looking up. “Your mom probably packs you a thermos full of vodka, right?” She heard the slap of a high-five and both Larry and Eric exploding in fits of laughter.

The sound went into her like knives. Her chest filled with hot lava. Now everybody in the school would know. They'd probably been blabbing about it all morning.

“You know, I heard something about last night, too,” said Johann, his voice just a bit higher than usual, strained with something he was trying to hold in. Patty turned and saw that he had turned around to face Larry and Eric, one foot on the bench, knee raised, like he was ready to spring out of his seat if he had to. Some kind of electric heat was coming off of him, like from the red wires of the toaster.

“I heard you screamed like a little girl, Eric, when something fell out of the window. Then you ran home, crying to your mummy. Is that true?”

Their laughter stopped.

“She – she sent her stupid dog after us!” Eric sputtered, pointing at Patty.

“Yeah! That damn mutt probably had rabies!” Larry said, too loudly. Kids all around them were turning in their seats now, stopping in mid-bite to watch the show.

“I heard that dog is no bigger than a Pekinese,” said Johann. “Isn’t that true, Patty?”

Heidi exploded in laughter across the table, putting her fist over her mouth to keep in the bits of peanut butter sandwich that were threatening to fly out. It was contagious. Patty felt the tickle coming up from her stomach, dissolving the knot of shame in her chest. Johann gestured with his hands the dimensions of a dog about the size of a shoebox.

“About so big, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, yeah, not even,” Patty said. She wanted to hug Johann. But by now, it seemed like half the school was watching.

And now Linda started laughing too, behind her book.

“Freaks! You’re all freaks!” Larry yelled, his face tight and red.

Patty turned around finally to face them, the laughter of the whole geek table behind her now like a waving flag. She was ready to tell Larry off for good, but just then Tammy appeared and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him away. The look on her face was something Patty had never seen before. Her eye met Patty’s for a fraction of a second, then darted away to the other side of the room. She whispered something into

Larry's ear and pushed him ahead of her, off to the jock table. Eric followed, his face pale and flushed at the same time, like someone had just hit him in the head with a surprise snowball.

“Did you see that?” Heidi whispered. “What got into *her*?”

Patty shook her head, still trying to absorb what had just happened. What had Tammy seen last night when she looked up at Patty's bedroom window? Whatever it was had freaked her out. Enough that she wanted Eric to leave Patty alone.

“That was perfect, Johann,” said Linda. “There's nothing boys hate worse than being called babies and cowards. And of course, that's what those two are.” Linda's back straightened, her freckled face coming back to its normal color.

“You mean, that's what they *all* are. I've never seen a look on Tammy's face like that before,” said Heidi, digging into a bag of potato chips. She stared over at the jock table, shaking her head with wonder.

Patty waited for one of them, Linda or Heidi, to ask what Eric had meant about the thermos full of vodka. But they never did.

Not once.

## Chapter Sixteen

Patty watched while Dad handed Lorraine the mashed potatoes. Watched while Lorraine spooned some out onto her plate, then onto Sarah's. Watched Sarah whine for more, and Lorraine drop another spoonful. Watched Lorraine unfold her napkin and spread it on her lap, while laughing at one of Dad's jokes, and all the time Patty wondered what would be the thing that was going to kill her.

*Sweet Lorraine.*

*She is in danger.*

There were a lot of things that could kill somebody. Car accidents, venomous snakes, electric outlets, Charlie Manson. A person could even drink the turpentine by accident when they were reaching for the Gatorade, and that could do it. One time Patty accidentally picked up a can of Orange Crush that had been sitting out for two days on the back porch, and spat out seven dead ants. She hadn't been able to look at an Orange Crush since. It was just luck that it hadn't turned out to be a can of deadly poison.

Dad was telling the story of him and his lab partner setting the science laboratory on fire when he was in college. Patty and David had heard it a bunch of times already, but Todd and Sarah were laughing hard. That was another thing – chemicals. Patty had heard that a pile of rags could catch fire spontaneously. Then there was spontaneous combustion—

“—and put it out with baking soda, right Patty?”

“What?” Patty looked at him.

“I said, remember when the French fry grease caught on fire two years ago, when your mother was cooking? What I taught you guys? About how to put it out?”

“Oh, yeah. Don't use water. Use baking soda.”

“Exactly. And that’s what I learned from that experience.”

“What about spontaneous combustion?” Patty asked.

“What do you mean? Spontaneous?” Dad put down his napkin.

“Of people.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She means spontaneous *human* combustion,” said David. “It’s a phenomenon where people suddenly burst into flames for no reason. Their whole body burns in seconds, totally to ashes. But it doesn’t burn anything else around them. You just walk in one day, and there’s a pile of ashes and maybe a burnt-up shoe, where the person was.”

“Cool,” said Todd.

“Oh, come on! Where did you hear this?” said Dad.

“It does sound a little far-fetched,” Lorraine added.

“I read about it in *Strange But True* magazine,” said Patty. It had been on the newsstand at a truck stop their family had gotten gas at three years ago, on their way to South Dakota. It had a picture on the cover of a baby born with reptile skin. Somehow, the stories in the magazine went perfectly with the overheated, slightly carsick, crushing boredom of the long road trip. She and David had read the whole thing cover to cover.

“But how does it happen?” Sarah asked, swirling her fork around in her potatoes.

“Usually the fire comes out of your stomach first,” said David.

Sarah looked up at him, laid down her fork, then lifted her shirt to look at her belly button.

“I think I see a flame coming out, now,” said Todd.

“Okay, that’s enough, kids. Let’s talk about school. What are you all doing in school?” said Lorraine.

*Go ahead, change the subject. Doesn’t make you safe,* thought Patty.

“Getting bored out of our minds,” said Todd.

“We’re doing mammals,” said Sarah.

“Mammals are good,” said Dad.

“David’s in a play at school,” said Patty.

“It’s a small part. *Very* small,” David said, giving her his I-don’t-want-to-talk-about-it look.

“Well, that’s terrific!” said Lorraine. “What play is it? Anything we’ve heard of?”

“*The Crucible*. I only tried out for it because we read it in American History class last year, and I thought it was cool.”

“What’s it about?” asked Todd.

“People faking demonic possession and then other people accusing people of being witches and then the witches getting tortured and killed. It was in the 1600’s. Only they weren’t witches, actually, they were just--”

“What’s demonic possession?” Sarah interrupted.

“Like in *The Exorcist*,” Todd was happy to explain. “You know, where your head spins around and you puke green vomit across the room and--”

“Kids? Eating? Remember? Our rule?” Lorraine sang each word on an upward note, half warning, half begging.

“Well, she asked!” Todd said, putting down his chicken leg like he needed both hands to talk. “How else am I sposta explain it?”

“I’m trying out for the Presidential Physical Fitness Award,” said Patty.

“Well, *that’s* a nice subject. What a great thing to do, Patty!” said Lorraine.

“Bunch of situps and pushups and climbing sweaty ropes. And then you get a little blue patch with an eagle on it. It’s *sooo cool*,” said David, stirring the bubbles out of his 7-up.

“Shut up!”

“Kids, no *shut up* at the table, please. Please?” Dad said. Why was it that everybody seemed to act more immature over at Dad’s and Lorraine’s place? Even Patty did. It was like going into a backwards world. Something about being around Sarah and Todd made her act like a little kid. What was that about? She couldn’t tell if she liked it or not.

After dinner, Patty and Sarah retreated to Sarah’s room while everybody else watched the Packers game. The two of them lay on their backs on Sarah’s bed, troll-tossing. It was a stupid game, but sort of fun; where each tossed their troll in the air on the word “go,” and tried to catch the other without dropping it.

“Dang, I keep missing,” said Sarah, reaching down among the floor’s wreckage of dirty socks and toys for the troll.

Patty absently stroked the purple hair of her troll, looked into its glinting gold eyes, holding them up to the light. There was something sinister about their eyes, she decided. Something she didn’t trust.

“I still don’t know how you can have so many of these lying around, staring at you. They really don’t creep you out? Ever?”

“I dunno. They’re like protection, kinda.”

“From what?”

“Stuff.”

“What kind of stuff?”

“Stuff that can hurt you.”

Patty thought about Lorraine again.

*She is in danger.*

“Hey, do you guys have stuff in this apartment that could kill a person?”

Sarah closed her hand around the orange tuft on her troll’s head, until bits of it poked out through her fingers. She looked at Patty, a funny look, like she wasn’t sure what kind of question this was and what was expected of her.

“*Hurt* a person, or *kill* a person? ‘cause a lot of stuff can hurt a person. Especially if a person is stupid. Like my brother. He tried to hang from his top bedroom bookshelf and the whole thing came falling down and he got a huge bump on his head—”

“No, I mean like poison, guns, electric wires hanging out of the walls, stuff like that.”

Sarah thought about it.

“How come you wanna know?”

Patty thought quickly.

“It’s for an assignment at school. We’re supposed to, like, check all over our houses and investigate the safety. Because something like a million people get killed by accidents in their own homes every year, did you know that?”

“A million? Really?”

“Yep.”

Sarah was buying it. Of course she couldn't tell Sarah the real reason she wanted to know. If Sarah knew what the Ghost Lady had said about Lorraine being in danger, it would totally freak her out.

"How come you don't investigate your own house then?"

"Because...the assignment's due tomorrow. I just remembered it now."

Patty was the best liar on earth.

"So, I'm gonna make you my assistant, okay? And then I'll mention your name in my report when I present it to the class. You'll be my Deputy Safety Officer."

Sarah smiled and sat up. "Okay. What do we have to do?"

Soon Patty and Sarah were opening cabinets and reading labels on bottles of cleaning products, seeing how sharp the kitchen knives were, checking outlets to see if the plates were loose, checking the windows to see if the frames were sturdy, or could be pushed out and somebody fall to their death (Patty's idea).

"How many safety hazards do we have so far, Sarah?"

*"Deputy Sarah."*

"Deputy Sarah."

Sarah looked at the yellow notepad she'd taken from the telephone table. "So far, we got a bottle of ammonia under the kitchen sink that says "poison" on the label with a skeleton face; a bookshelf with a big rubber plant on top that could break your head if it fell off, a razor in the bathroom that if you unscrew it, you can take out the blade..."

"Which is totally sharp--"

"Which is totally sharp." Sarah added a note in the margin.

"But no guns, right?"

“Nope. No guns, but some pretty sharp knives in the kitchen.”

“But none of them are up high in a place where they could fall down and chop off your arm or your head or anything, right?”

“Right.”

“Okay. First we gotta give the report to your mom. As Deputy Safety Officer, you get to read it.”

“Really?” Sarah bounced up and down on the balls of her feet.

“We’ll wait for the half-time commercials,” said Patty.

Sarah held the paper before her like the president giving a speech, standing right in front of the TV, which made Todd yell and throw popcorn at her until Lorraine told him to knock it off.

“...and in conclusion, the Carston house receives a B rating for safety, because of the razor blade, the poisonous ammonia, and the sharp knives.”

“You’re leaving out the killer rubber plant,” said David, picking at a hangnail on his thumb.

“And the killer rubber plant,” said Sarah.

“Well, that was just *wonderful*, kids!” said Lorraine, clapping her hands and beaming at them. “What an interesting school project, Patty. And Sarah, it was so nice of you to help. Isn’t it great what we can do when we work together?”

“Can we get her out from in front of the TV now? Jesus!” said Todd.

“But it’s not just for school, Lorraine,” said Patty. (Why was it that grownups were always missing the whole point of everything?) “The idea is that you’re supposed to change some things in the house to make it safer. After we make the report, I mean.”

“And so we will – right, kids?”

“I always thought that plant was stupid, anyway,” said Todd.

Patty felt better. At least she’d tried to do something. Maybe it was fate, and there wasn’t really anything she could do, and Lorraine was doomed no matter what. When a ghost tells you that you’re in danger, it may already be too late. But at least she’d tried.

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For once, Patty actually got to watch what she wanted to watch on a Wednesday night instead of Hawaii 5-0, because for once, David wasn’t there, because of his school play rehearsal.

*“The young hippopotamus will continue nursing from his mother for nearly a year. He is only able to stay under water for thirty seconds, so nursing must take place at intervals--”*

“What a pain in the butt,” remarked Patty to herself. She dipped a potato chip in the sour cream container. Jessica had bought the chips and dip. Suddenly, they had all this great food in the house, thanks to Jessica.

*“With no natural predators, the hippo is king of the African rivers. Even the crocodile makes way as the group of females—”*

That second, the TV screen turned to a mass of gray static, the sound to gray noise.

“Damn!” said Patty, and rolled off the couch. She turned the knobs this way and that, banged the side of the set. Nothing. Probably the cable had gone out. It had

happened once before, after a bad snowstorm. But the weather was fine tonight. It wasn't even raining.

She waited a few minutes to see if anything would change, then got the idea to go upstairs and knock on Jessica's door. See what she was watching on her TV. Would Jessica want to watch Wild Kingdom?

"Yeah, come on in."

Jessica was twisting the antennae of the portable set when Patty walked in.

"I don't get it. It was working just fine, then it just crapped out," said Jessica.

"Mine, too! I mean, the one downstairs – same thing."

Jessica put her hands on her hips, frowning at the fuzzy screen, then suddenly turned to Patty.

"But isn't the one downstairs the cable?"

"Yeah."

"Well, then why would they *both* be out? This one's not *on* the cable," she said, pointing at it.

Patty got a crawling feeling in her stomach. Jessica banged on the side of the TV set a couple of times, and suddenly an explosion of electric noise filled the house.

At first, neither of them could tell what it was, it was so loud and confused. Patty ran out of Jessica's room and realized what it was: the radios. Everywhere in the house, they were blasting away on full volume, each tuned to a different station. Jessica turned hers off first, then joined Patty, going from room to room, turning them off. Patty had never thought about how many radios they had in the house before. One in each

bedroom, one in the kitchen, one in the living room, even one in the shower bathroom.

What was going on?

At last, there was only one left playing. As if making a bad joke, it was playing Sarah's song from when Patty first met her, *Muskrat Love*. Patty followed the sound to Gloria's bedroom. She wondered why Gloria hadn't woken up and turned it off herself. But when she came in the room, the bed was rumpled and empty.

*"Now he's tickling her fancy, rubbing her toes, muzzle to muzzle..."*

Patty shut it off. The silence of the house suddenly seemed louder than all the noise before. It pressed into her ears, felt like a sheet of rubber around her head.

Where was Gloria?

"Mom?" she said it normally first.

Then she shouted it.

Nothing.

"Patty? You looking for your mom?" It was Jessica from downstairs.

Patty ran into the hallway, opening doors, looking in.

"Is she down there?" Patty shouted down the stairs.

"I don't know, I'll look!" Jessica shouted back.

Patty pushed open the bathroom door, but it was stuck on something. It would only open a few inches. Patty peeked inside.

It was stuck on Gloria.

She was lying on her back, her glasses on the floor next to the toilet, one lens popped out.

For some reason, that was the most horrible part of all. The gaping opening of the left eye of the glasses, the helpless, ruined way they lay there. The glasses that were part of her mother's face.

She yelled for Jessica, her voice a half-scream, as she pushed her way into the bathroom. Instantly, the sharp smell of vomit hit her nose, and her stomach heaved upwards, threatening to let loose. The left side of Gloria's face was streaked with it, and under her head, her hair was soaked in a pool of the liquor she had consumed that afternoon.

"Mom, wake up!" Patty's voice was high, crazy, like someone else's voice.

Patty shook her back and forth, but she wasn't moving. Her head lolled like a rag doll's, her eyes closed.

Jessica pushed her way into the bathroom.

"Oh, Christ – honey, stand back, let me get to her."

Jessica patted Gloria's cheeks and spoke to her gently.

"She's not breathing."

Jessica put a finger in Gloria's mouth, pulled down her jaw, and pushed her head to the side. More vomit trickled out, then the muscle of Gloria's throat jerked. She made a gurgling, gasping cough. Patty kind of fell back against the sink, grabbed her stomach, and commanded it to be still.

"Honey, I need you to call 911. Now."

Patty squeezed out the door and ran for the red phone in Gloria's room. Red for emergency. Red for when there was a nuclear war and the president had to call Moscow. Red for fire, red for blood. She'd never called 911 before. It was amazing how easy it

was. Even with her hands shaking like crazy. They answered right away. They didn't even ask *why* her mom was passed out drunk on the bathroom floor. Didn't even ask how old Patty was or was this a joke, or what. They asked the address. They said the ambulance was on its way.

At the hospital, Jessica sat with Patty in the hard plastic seats of the waiting room. Nurses rushed by them, wheeling people around, people attached to plastic bags of fluids with tubes, old ladies in wheelchairs, people with bandaged limbs, people with face masks attached to little green tanks.

It felt like a million years, during which they each only got up to pee once. As Patty's butt went numb on the hard plastic chairs, the knots inside of her finally let go, and Jessica held her for a long time while she cried. Finally, a nurse came out and told them Gloria was in a place called Detox, and would be there for the next three days. After that, she would be put in a place called Rehab, where she would be for three weeks at least.

"And she won't be able to come out, at all?" Patty asked. Jessica had her arm around Patty's shoulder and squeezed her tighter as she said it.

"I'm afraid not. But the inpatient rehab program does allow her to make phone calls, so you'll be able to talk on the phone." The nurse looked at Jessica.

"Are you the next of kin?" she asked.

"Niece. To Ms. Lofthaus. Cousin to this one," Jessica said, squeezing Patty by both shoulders, now. Harder. Patty got the message.

"Are there any other adults at home?"

"Just me, ma'am."

“And you’re living on the premises?”

*The premises?* Is that what their house was now? It sounded like a place where a crime had happened. A place of orders and regulations. Not a place where people lived at all. *Leave these premises, in the name of the law.* Patty suddenly thought of David. They had completely forgotten about him. He was probably on the premises right now, wondering what the hell was going on.

“Yes, ma’am. And I’ll stay until she’s discharged and back at home.”

The nurse nodded, and gave Jessica some papers to sign.

## Chapter Seventeen

“So does this make you, like, our legal guardian now, or what?”

Jessica’s little green car slipped along the almost deserted drive along the cemetery, Patty looking out the window at the graves, remembering when she used to hold her breath when passing the cemetery at night, because kids at school said you could accidentally breathe in a ghost. Hard to believe she was ever that dumb.

“No, I don’t think it means that, honey. I’m not really sure what it means, to tell you the truth. Only that for now, it gets the social workers off our backs.”

“Social workers?”

Jessica bit her lower lip, pulling her hair to the side.

“You know, don’t...don’t worry about it just yet, honey. We won’t worry ‘til it’s time to worry, okay? How you doin’? You hungry?” Jessica patted her knee. “I don’t

know about you, but I'm starved, and we got to bring something home for your brother, too."

"Yeah, okay." Patty had forgotten about dinner, but now that Jessica mentioned it, her stomach felt like a popped balloon. Food might be a good idea. "Oh, man, he's gonna freak out when he hears about this."

"That's why we're gonna make it a little easier with some burgers," said Jessica, taking a turn up the road to the A&W.

So this was it. Her mom was really an alcoholic now. A drunk. Not just a nasty name Larry and Eric called her. Not just a *maybe*, as in the sick feeling she got in the lunch room the other day; as in *maybe they're right*. It was for sure now. When people in white coats start talking about Detox and Rehab and medical treatment, well, that makes it for sure, doesn't it?

Patty tried to feel what it felt like, knowing for sure. It was hard to tell. So far, it was like sinking into something dark, where she couldn't see the bottom.

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David poked his straw around in his root beer. His cheeseburger only had two bites taken out, and it was getting cold in front of him. Patty wished he would look up and get his hair out of his eyes.

"Important thing is, we got her there in time," Jessica was saying. "She's gonna be okay. Detox is a place where she'll be safe. They'll keep her there until all the alcohol

is out of her system, and then when they take her to rehab, they can do things to make her better.”

“*What* things?” David finally raised his eyes to look at Jessica through the stringy waterfall of hair.

“They’re experts at this. It’s a good hospital. I had a friend once come out of that program.”

“Yeah, but what do they *do*? What can they do in there that she couldn’t do herself?”

“Well, for one thing, they don’t have anything in there she can get drunk on. They don’t even let you have Listerine. The rehab program -- it’s like a big hotel they all stay in, see? And they take care of everything -- meals, cleaning, and all day you get doctor’s visits, and talk to psychiatrists and they... Well, they take care of you.”

David leaned back from the table and folded his arms. He flicked the hair out of his face and stared hard at Jessica.

“And then she comes out, and then what? How do we know it won’t start all over again? And then next time she does this, maybe none of us are here to get her to the hospital, and then what?”

“Honey, we can’t think about--”

David got up from the table.

“David, I wish you wouldn’t walk away just now,” said Jessica. She was holding on to the edge of the table with her fingertips, like she was trying to remind herself to stay in her chair. She already knew that running after David when he was like this was a bad idea.

“Yeah, well I wish a lot of things,” David said. He was almost out the door when he turned around and looked at them both, his fingers gripping the door frame, his lips a white line. “This doesn’t *solve* anything, you know! Unless they keep her in there forever, they can’t stop her from killing herself, if that’s what she wants to do.”

“David, stop it!” said Patty, she was starting to cry.

He looked at her, and for a second, it almost seemed like he saw the tears coming down her face. He took a few faltering steps towards the table, then he grabbed the burger and root beer and headed up to his room. The door slammed.

“God, why does he have to act like that?” said Patty.

“He’ll be okay. Leave him alone for now. It’s a lot to get used to, all at once,” said Jessica, dipping a French fry in ketchup.

Sure, a lot to get used to. And was it supposed to be easy for Patty? Why did *he* get to be a jerk all the time? She’d like to be a jerk sometimes, too. But whenever she did, everyone jumped all over her. With David it was always; leave him alone, don’t stir him up, give the evil genius space.

Jinx wagged his tale at the remains of her burger on the edge of the plate. She tossed it to him. He chomped it down, then eyed Jessica’s fries.

“How about soon as we’re done here, you and me clean up that bathroom?” said Jessica. She made it sound like a special opportunity.

“Don’t worry, kid – I’ll throw down some Pine-sol first, and we’ll hold our noses.” She dabbed Patty’s wet cheek with an A&W napkin. “We’ll both feel better when it’s done. I guarantee it.”

It was way past bedtime when Patty finally lay down that night. For the first time she began to think about how they had found Gloria. If the radios hadn't all turned on at once, she never would have gone into Gloria's room and noticed she wasn't in it. Even when it was happening, she knew it was the Ghost Lady, but now, now that her mother was safe in the Detox place...

Had the Ghost Lady done it on purpose? Did she know her mother was in trouble?

She thought about what Johann said about ghosts. That some of them couldn't make themselves heard, some of them couldn't make themselves seen. That was hard for them to do things in this world. Had it been hard for the Ghost Lady to mess up all the TVs and radios? Did she really have to work at it? Like a ghost version of the Presidential Physical Fitness Award competition? There had to be a reason she did it. All Patty knew for sure was that Gloria wasn't breathing when they found her, and there's only so long a person can go without breathing.

Did the Ghost Lady save her life?

What other way was there to look at it?

Patty couldn't believe she had ever wanted to get rid of her. What if she had gone with Johann's first idea, and they had tried to make her leave? Would her mother be dead now?

The thought was too much for Patty.

"Oh, God, if that was you, Ghost Lady, trying to help, thank you," she said to the darkness. "Thank you, thank you, thank you, Ghost Lady."

She waited, listened, but didn't hear anything but the plastic sheet crinkling in the window.

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Jessica was on the phone with Patty's dad the next morning when Patty came downstairs for breakfast.

"Yep. Rehab for three weeks. It's the standard treatment....No, really, Ted, it's okay. I don't mind at all. I'm home a lot during the day....Yeah, it's part time. Listen, Patty's up now. I'm gonna put her on."

"Hey, hon. How you doing with all this?"

Part of Patty wanted to cry as soon as she heard his voice. Then another part of her, a new part, stopped her. She wasn't really sure about this other part of her yet, it was so new. It was almost like a bigger Patty was growing inside of her. The same Patty that was able to pick up the red phone and dial 911 when her mother was on the bathroom floor. The same part that knew to keep her mouth shut when Jessica said she was their cousin at the hospital.

"I'm okay," she said.

He asked if they had enough food and stuff in the house. If David was okay. If they were still going to school and everything. And Patty said yes, yes, yes to everything and waited to see what else he'd say. He promised to be there at his usual time on Saturday afternoon, the day after tomorrow. They would all sit down and talk then.

"And you'll call if you need anything, right?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"Sweetie? This is the best thing for her. You know that, right? She's in the best place she can be."

Patty swallowed. It was the same thing Jessica had said, only in different words. So how come it sounded like the same voice he used that one time when she was six and their other cat got sick and had to be put to sleep? *It's the best thing, really...*

He repeated the part about them all sitting down together to talk on Saturday, and then they said goodbye and hung up.

Jessica came back into the kitchen. "What - that's it?" she said.

Patty was still looking at the phone on the wall. "What do you mean?" she said.

"I mean...didn't he ask to talk to me again? Or anything?" Jessica's cheeks were turning pink.

"He says he's gonna be here on Saturday. And that we'll talk then."

"I told him I *work* on Saturday. I mean, what - is that really all he said to you?"

Suddenly, that bigger Patty inside was done talking about it.

"Yeah, that's all he said. His number's on the wall if you want to call him back," she said to Jessica and walked out, faster than she'd meant to, but the bigger Patty inside was moving her feet. She grabbed Jinx's leash to take him for a walk. All she knew for sure right then was that she needed to get out of the house. In between Jinx's squirmings and whines as she fastened the leash she heard Jessica whisper to herself from the kitchen.

*"Bastard!"*

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It was definitely a whole new world, the house without Gloria. She and Jessica spent Saturday cleaning the whole place from top to bottom, starting with her mother's room. They threw out all her empty bottles, washed her bed sheets and clothes, swept and mopped the floor. Jessica hired a guy to put a new window in Patty's room so she didn't have to listen to the sad plastic anymore. Jessica's new job working at the bakery next to the Kohl's grocery store meant she didn't get home until six most nights. Now, every day they came home from school, the house was quiet. Jessica always brought home something from work – donuts, muffins, rolls, cookies. Then she and Patty would make dinner together.

“It's a good thing we have to wear those stupid white aprons. Covers up my belly. They won't know for another couple months yet,” Jessica said, looking down at the small, round swell that was already there, rubbing it gently.

“Can you feel anything yet?” Patty asked.

“Nope. But the doctor said it won't be for a few weeks, yet.”

Patty hoped Jessica would still be there when the baby was born. But it all seemed so far in the future. The future was suddenly a lot shorter these days. Patty could only look three days forward, maybe four, before everything got too crazy to look at.

“So, I been thinking,” Patty said, and Jessica looked up from the dishes.

“I've been thinking, what do you think was going on with the TVs and the radios that day? Before the ambulance came?” Patty hadn't really asked Jessica until now. There had been so much else going on. Jessica looked confused for a moment, and opened her mouth like she was about to say something then shut it again.

“What?” said Patty.

“Nothing – I just...thought you were gonna say something else, that’s all.” Then she looked around the house, at the sunlight coming in through the dining room windows, the cat sleeping on the windowsill.

“It’s funny – this is just about the last house in the world I’d ever expect to be haunted.” She said it like “hanted.” Patty tried not to laugh. “I mean, I love it here. But that – that was kind of scary. I been thinking about it, too. I can’t think of any other explanation.”

Then she told Patty about her aunt’s house in Macon, where shadows would walk through walls, and the night Jessica’s cousin got killed in Vietnam, how he showed up at the foot of her aunts’ bed in his army uniform, his mouth opening and closing like he was speaking to her.

“And Granny, who practically raised him as a kid, you know, woke us up that morning crying that she knew something awful had happened to him, and sure enough, before the week was out, one those cars the army sends out showed up at the door, and he’d been killed near some place called Dac To.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah, so that kind of stuff happens in some houses. I do get *feelings* around here, sometimes. You know what I mean?”

Patty nodded.

“Whatever it was, it went crazy when your mom was in trouble. Or, maybe, it was like the whole energy of emergency was in the air, affecting the electricity, somehow.”

“But it started happening before we even *knew* it was an emergency.”

Jessica looked around the house, as if she could see a clue somewhere in the air.

“Just goes to show, honey – we don’t know squat. Nobody does. Not really.”

Patty had to agree.

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Dad showed up for his regular Saturday while Jessica was at work. David was out someplace. Nobody knew where.

“I said I was going to be here at eleven, where the hell is he?” Dad was annoyed.

“I told you, I don’t *know*. Like he tells *me* where he’s going?”

Patty hadn’t been able to talk to David since the whole thing happened. He hardly ever came out of his room except to go to school, or to go out. Just out. Riding his bike somewhere or just disappearing for hours. He hadn’t washed his hair either, and it was getting greasy. Patty hoped they wouldn’t be going to a restaurant or something today.

Dad sat down in the big square armchair that had belonged Gloria’s father, the one with the wooden arms and the loose upholstery strips that the cat kept playing with and yanking out further. He twisted his knuckles and looked at the floor.

“So, how is everything here? I talked to Jessica on the phone and she seemed to have everything under control.”

If he was going to answer his own question, why did he even ask it in the first place, Patty wondered.

“Yeah. It’s okay. There’s more food in the house now.”

Dad nodded, looking at her for a flickering second, then looking around the room, folding and unfolding his hands.

“Place looks cleaner, too. That’s good. But this thing with David being gone, I mean, he knew I was coming, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. We talked about it last night. I mean, as much as he talks about anything.”

He didn’t say anything for a while. Jinx lay at his feet, staring up at him in that way he always did. Patty could swear Jinx was human sometimes, when he looked like that. Not staring in his begging-for-food way, and not in his having-to-pee way, but in the way he always looked at Dad: quiet, concentrated, searching. Like he was trying to figure out what had happened.

After a while, Dad’s eyes went to the window.

“Look, I know this is hard for you guys. And it may not be easy to understand now, but all of this is for the best. For her, I mean. She’ll be much better when she gets out. You’ll see.”

He only turned his eyes to her on the last three words. Patty wasn’t sure what to say. She nodded, picked at a fingernail. The silence of the house pressed in around her ears. Jessica always kept music on when she was home. Now the quiet between their words grew louder, and Patty felt that *watching* feeling again, behind her back, from the stairwell this time, but she didn’t turn around. Then suddenly, she was saying it, without even having a plan first, without even knowing she was going to say it.

“Aren’t you going to ask us to move in with you now? I mean, now that she’s not gonna be back for, like a month, or something?”

His head jerked up quickly, his eyes meeting hers, blinking hard behind his glasses.

“Well, sweetie, you know...” He got up and plunged his hands in his pockets. He looked out the window, leaning against the frame. Then he turned, took a step towards her, eyes on the carpet. “You know we don’t have any extra bedrooms or anything. There’s no place, really, for you guys to sleep. Barely enough room for the four of us in that apartment as it is.”

Patty just looked at him, and she didn’t know what was coming out of her eyes, but she wished she could see it. Because whatever it was, it made him stop for a second. It made everything stop for a second: time, space, the sound of the birds from outside. The two of them locked eyes, and for the first time in forever, Patty felt that feeling like they were locking brains, too. That feeling she never got with anyone else. And she could see how he wanted to feel it too, but at the same time, he didn’t, and when his eyes turned away, it was like a band-aid ripping off a scab that hadn’t healed, sending the bright red blood beading back up again.

“I mean, once the next book is out -- I mean, if it does well, we’re thinking about buying a house. But for now...well, you know what I’m saying, right?” He folded his arms and looked at her.

Patty nodded. “Yeah. Right.” She swallowed the thickness in her throat.

Why had she even asked? What moron voice had that been, popping out of her mouth like that? Now *she* was the one asking questions she already knew the answer to. This had to be the stupidest conversation in the history of the universe. If she were David, she could turn around right now and slam herself in her room. But then Dad would just stand outside the door and beg her to come out, tell her she was being silly. With that

miserable whining kind of sound in his voice that he never had before they got divorced. *Come on -- please? We'll go get ice cream.* Where the hell was David, anyway?

“I mean, Jessica seems to be taking care of things around here. Been a long time since I’ve seen the place this clean. She’s taking good care of you guys, right?”

He didn’t really want her to answer. Patty could tell by the way he got up from the chair when he said it, walked over to the bookcase and examined the titles. He reached up to the highest shelf, and pulled down the big gray book called *Being and Nothingness*. That was one of the books Patty liked to look at, because who in the world would think of calling a book that? It was kooky. But the one time she had gotten up on a chair, pulled it down and tried to read it, none of it made any sense. It must take a lot of words to talk about nothingness, she figured.

She could write about nothingness. About the nothingness in the room when the Ghost Lady had just been there and left. The nothingness that was really a somethingness, because it was a place where someone had been, and now wasn’t. A place in space still stamped with the shape of the person, like the hole in the cookie dough after you press the star-shaped cookie cutter into it and take out the shape. The hole stays and it looks at you, like it’s expecting something. Dad didn’t even seem to know that he had left a hole. He was standing in it right now, but the edges didn’t fit him anymore. Like he was both too big for it and too small.

Maybe that’s all a ghost was – just a person-shaped hole in space where somebody once was.

Jinx's tags jingled and he got up and ran to the door. Something had broken his staring-at-Dad hypnotic trance. He whined and leapt at the doorknob as David pushed the door open.

"Where've you been? The movie starts at 1:00, remember?" said Dad, tucking the book under his arm.

"Nowhere," said David, glancing up at him briefly, then bending to scratch Jinx's ears.

"Well, now we're going to be late. I mean, by the time we find parking and get the tickets--"

"Sorry I ruined everything," said David. "That's my specialty."

Then he looked up at Dad in a way that made Patty's throat tighten. He wasn't sorry. They stood like that, the two of them looking at each other, not moving, until Dad put the book down and put his hands in his pants pockets.

"I suppose we could go to a later showing," Dad said. "There's one at three, I think. Why don't we sit down a minute?"

"I'm already sitting," said Patty.

"He's not *talking* to you, ditz brain."

"Hey, give your sister a break. Seriously, let's just sit a minute." Dad sat in the big square chair again, and his hand automatically went to picking at the loose upholstery strip, just like the cat. David remained standing.

"So...how's everything going around here?"

"Great. Fabulous."

Dad swallowed. He seemed to be working to keep his eyes on David's. Like he was aiming at a dart board, and David's eye was the bull's eye, the one blue eye showing from behind his hair.

"Patty says Jessica's doing a good job. Making dinner at night, keeping the place clean."

"Sure. Best 22-year-old pregnant mom with a psycho boyfriend anybody ever had."

Patty's breath stopped. David hadn't even paused a second before he said it. It was like he had stored it up beforehand and was just waiting for the chance to launch it. She opened her mouth to defend Jessica, but as soon as she did, she changed her mind.

It wasn't about Jessica.

Dad stopped picking at the upholstery and gripped the arms of the chair.

"And school? School's going alright?"

"I don't know." David's eyes fell to the carpet.

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"I don't *know*, okay? Am I the one the writes the report cards?"

"Well, are you doing your homework?"

"Sometimes. When I don't have play rehearsal. There's a lot of stuff happening."

Dad swallowed and took a breath like it was meant to calm him down, but it only made his voice sharper.

"I'm aware of that, David. That's what we're talking about. Look, I realize this is a difficult time for you guys, and I'm glad Jessica's here, and it's not easy, I know. But even though your mother's in the hospital, things still need to get done. You still need to

show up places on time, get to class, do your homework. Take a shower, for God's sake – look at you. The world doesn't stop just because--”

“Just because my mother's in the drunk tank, and we sit here every night hoping Jessica's boyfriend doesn't show up to try to break in and try to kill her? Is that what you were gonna say?” David's voice was cranking up.

“David, I...”

“Well don't worry! None of that is keeping me from doing my homework. So, you can rest easy.”

“Now listen, this is exactly what I'm talking about!” Dad got out of the chair. “There are still *rules*, like rules about how you talk to your parents, for example!”

“Who the hell are *you*?” David yelled it so loud, Jinx's tail went between his legs. His face was red, his hands clenched into fists. Patty's legs folded under her into a squat so she could jump out of the couch and run away if she needed to.

“You show up here like you're all in charge all of a sudden – you're not in charge of *shit*! Don't you *get* it? Why should I listen to *you*? Where the hell have you been all this time?”

Dad came back at him just as loud, with that voice she hadn't heard since they were still married, since the fights at night.

“You have food in the refrigerator because *I* pay child support! I see you every weekend! We spend more time together now than we did when I was married to your mother--”

“What do you want, the fucking father-of-the-year award? Thanks for the giant sacrifice, and pretending to give a shit, but we're fine, okay? Everything here is just

fucking *peachy!*” David picked up *Being and Nothingness* and flung it at him so hard, he ducked. Then he headed for the front door.

“Forget about it! Go home to your perfect wife!” he added, just before he slammed it shut behind him.

Dad sort of fell into the square chair and took off his glasses, something he almost never did. He grabbed his face in his hands like he was afraid it would fall off. He stayed like that for a long time, his glasses dangling between two fingers, and it was pretty obvious they weren’t going to make it to the movie.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

The problem now was the problem of telling people. Patty had been thinking about it all weekend, and now the bus was almost at Johann’s house and she still hadn’t decided whether or not to tell him. And if she did tell him, how much should she tell?

The thing was, Johann was the only one besides her who understood about the Ghost Lady. The last time they talked about it -- and now it seemed like ten years ago, even though it had only been last week -- Patty was worried about the Ghost Lady hurting somebody. And now she had probably just saved her mom’s life. Who else could she talk to about this? Who else wouldn’t think she was crazy?

But the puke. The broken glasses on the bathroom floor. Detox. The thought of telling him all that was like a giant ocean wave coming at her, knocking her over, dragging her out to sea.

Could she tell Linda? Linda liked Patty too much to say anything unkind or even look at her funny, no matter what Patty said or did. But she could tell that although Linda wouldn't say it out loud, she didn't really completely believe Patty about the Ghost Lady. Linda had her own explanations about things, always logical and scientific. And she didn't know much about Patty's mom at all. They didn't talk much about their moms, except the usual stuff about them both being divorced and working. The only difference was that Linda's mom taught English literature at the University and wasn't locked up in the drunk tank throwing up and shaking and crying.

She was just starting to realize that school was the last place in the entire universe she wanted to be when Johann leapt up the bus steps and swung himself into the seat beside her. He immediately started talking about the project he was working on for his science class, which was to determine whether weight had any effect on how fast things fell. He'd been practicing last night by dropping various objects from his bedroom window.

"And I've determined, but its only a theory now, mind you, that it's not about how heavy it is at all, because the eraser hit the ground at exactly the same time as the aluminum foil ball," (He pronounced it al-u-*min*-ee-um.) "...but the mitten took longer than the boiled egg, which I think has got more to do with wind resistance, so..."

They were almost at the school. Her stomach was churning and rolling now, as if the bus was a boat that had made her seasick. She wanted to reach into her skin and yank out her stomach by the roots. Be a creature that had no internal organs, no feelings. A jellyfish or a sea slug. The bus jerked to a stop. If she didn't tell him now, she wouldn't see him again until lunch.

“Johann, my mom’s in the hospital.”

He looked at her for the first time since sitting down. His eyes opened like two blue umbrellas. His mouth was still open to deliver his conclusions on mitten wind resistance. As the doors hissed open and kids began piling out, he took Patty’s hand and pulled her up out of the seat. She hadn’t realized until then that she hadn’t stood up, that she was clutching her books to her chest, that she had forgotten to breathe, that she had tears streaming down her face.

“What happened?” he whispered to her as soon as the bus roared away. They stood there on the curb as other kids yelled and jostled each other towards the school entrance.

“Why doncha kiss her, Van *hoooot?*”

“Why don’t you kiss my arse?” Johann yelled over his shoulder.

Explosions of laughter over the word *arse*. Patty could tell that they secretly thought it was cool, the way Johann said it, even as they mocked him. Nobody secretly thought *she* was cool.

“She’s...”

In *Detox*.

Detox, the place for drunks. Then going to *Rehab*. Rehab, the place where they don’t let you have Listerine, just in case you might be tempted to chug it down for a thrill. Was Detox like a cell with rubber walls? Was she screaming for a drink right that very moment? Patty looked at her sneakers.

“She...she fainted. And we couldn’t wake her up. We called the ambulance and...”

“Oh, my God. Was it like a heart attack or something?”

She looked up at him and could see that he was serious. He really didn't get it. She opened her mouth to explain it to him. But how? *Well, you see, it's a funny thing what happens when you try to drink a whole bottle of brandy for dinner...*

But that's not what came out.

“They're...they're doing tests. They don't know yet. Why it happened, I mean.”

Patty looked over her shoulder as the school bell rang and the door monitors kicked the props back and closed the front doors. She didn't even care about getting detention. They could keep her in there for ten years. At least then she wouldn't have to answer teachers' questions, or *anybody's* questions. Maybe she'd get the cool detention monitor, the sixth grade math teacher with the long hair who always brought in a radio and played it really soft on the oldies station while he sat there and read paperback spy novels. Sometimes a Beatles song would come on, and if the afternoon sunlight was coming in through the windows at just the right angle, detention became the best place to be in the entire school.

“Well, I... I hope she's all right,” Johann stammered. “I mean, I hope that whatever they find is wrong with her, that they can fix it, I mean.” She tried to look at him, but the nervous, sad look in his eyes was too much to look at, like looking at the sun.

They both went to their separate home rooms, with the usual “see you at lunch.” She had been so close. So close to telling him. Now it wasn't just that she *didn't* tell him, she had actually *lied*. Why? What kind of friend was she now?

She was coming back from the office with her afternoon detention slip before she realized she had forgotten to tell him the part about the Ghost Lady.

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At lunch time, everybody at the geek table seemed to believe the mysterious fainting story. Linda had given her a strange look, more baffled than suspicious. As if she couldn't figure out whether to say *everything is going to be okay* or *oh my God, I'm so sorry*.

“Is she conscious now?” Heidi asked.

“Oh, yeah. She doesn't even remember fainting.”

“So, you talked to her?”

“Uh, not yet. She can't talk on the phone until they finish the tests.”

Linda gave her another look.

“So, does this mean you're living with your Dad now?” Heidi said, pulling the top slice of bread off her peanut butter sandwich and eating it open-face.

Patty stuck her fork into a mushy slice of meatloaf.

*Well, sweetie, you know...barely enough room for the four of us as it is.*

“No. We got Jessica staying with us. So it's okay.”

“Now, who's Jessica again?” Linda asked, digging a cookie out of her Josie and the Pussycats lunchbox. “I don't think I've met her.”

Why couldn't people stop asking questions? Even Linda, and Linda was about as nice as a person could get, but Patty wished she could just stuff everybody's mouth with a giant rubber eraser. *Maybe this meatloaf would do the trick*, she thought, *since it's totally impossible to eat it.*

By two in the afternoon, Patty was in the nurse's office, with the stomach ache of the century. She got excused from detention and was sent home. It was a lonely, strange feeling, riding the almost empty bus back to her neighborhood with the sun still high in the sky. But as soon as she sat down, with two whole bus seats to herself, her stomach began to feel better. The farther she got from school, the more it unknotted. She even fell asleep, her head leaning against the sunny window, and didn't wake up until the bus was at her block.

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Jessica managed to lure David out of his room on Day Five, because that was the day they needed to be by the phone at exactly four-thirty pm, because Gloria would be calling from Rehab. She was only allowed to call once every three days, and it had to be at particular times. If they missed the call, they had to wait for three days until the next scheduled call.

"You don't have to be happy about it. Hell, nobody's happy about it."

Jessica leaned her head against David's door, talking right into the wood. That way she didn't need to yell. Patty watched from the top of the stairs.

"You don't even have to sit with us. Just get on the extension upstairs and say hello to your mother."

Silence. Then a muffled "okay." Jessica grinned at Patty and gave the thumbs-up sign.

At exactly four-thirty pm -- amazingly exactly -- the telephone rang.

Patty and Jessica were waiting in the kitchen. Jessica picked it up first. She kept her voice light, normal, even laughing at something Gloria said. They talked about Jessica's job, everyday things.

Then she handed the phone to Patty.

"Mom?"

"Hi honey. How you doing?"

Her voice was different. Even, clear, but thin, somehow; like all the weight had been taken out of it. A voice in zero gravity.

"I'm okay. How about you?"

"Where's your brother?"

Patty was wondering the same thing.

"Um, he's..."

"Here," said a voice on the line. Jessica was pointing at the ceiling and mouthing a question to Patty. Patty nodded and gave the "okay" sign. Jessica smiled and gave the thumbs-up sign. They would make an excellent team at charades.

"How are you kids doing?"

Patty waited for David to say something. It was his turn.

"Okay," he said.

"What's...uh...what's it like in there?" Patty asked, immediately regretting it. It was the kind of question you ask to somebody in jail. But that's what it *felt* like. Like they were speaking to her through the bars, with a board-looking guard standing in the corner, overhearing everything.

“Oh, sweetie. I can’t really talk about it. It’s a good place -- it’s just, it’s hard. I don’t expect you to understand.”

*Well, great, then, I won’t*, was the phrase that popped into Patty’s head. But she didn’t say it. What she said was, “Is it true that they won’t even let you have Listerine?”

“What kind of as stupid-ass question is that?” David said. He was starting to sound like himself again.

“Actually, honey, *it is* true. And nothing with rubbing alcohol in it, either. Can you believe some people have actually tried to drink rubbing alcohol in here?”

“God.”

“This is the thing they keep telling us, and I’m starting to really get it now, that this is a *disease*. I mean, what else but a disease would make a person do that?”

A *disease*. Her mother had a disease. Was that better than being a drunk? Patty wasn’t sure yet.

“So, no, honey. No mouthwash, no rubbing alcohol, no astringents, no pain killers or sleeping pills. They come into your room every day to search it and make sure you haven’t had anything smuggled in.”

“Seriously?” said David.

“Seriously. And they pretty much chart your every movement. Therapy sessions, group therapy, AA meetings -- so it’s not like you’d even have a moment to sneak off and have a drink, anyway.”

“What’s AA?” asked Patty.

“Alcoholics Anonymous. And they have a group for kids, too. They’ll probably be asking you guys to come in sometime this week.”

To *come in*? Come in for *what*?

“What does that mean?” asked David.

“You know, sweetie, I’d rather just let them explain it, because I don’t have much time here. They’re only giving me fifteen minutes. Are you guys doing alright in school? Are you eating with Jessica at night?”

They said yes they were. Of course. What other answer was there? Were they going to say something to freak her out?

“And when do you get out?” asked David.

“In exactly eighteen days,” she said. “And yes, I am counting.”

“I’m counting, too,” said Patty.

The line was silent for what felt like a long time. When Gloria’s voice came back, there were tears in it.

“I want you guys to know...that when I come out of here...When I come out of here, I’m going to be well. I need you to believe that. I know I haven’t been a good mother to you guys... I know you haven’t been able to trust me. You have no idea how much this hurts, you can’t know...”

Patty’s face was streaming with tears. They fell onto her jeans, making dark spots. She opened her mouth to say something, but what? What do you say to that?

“They’re telling me I have to hang up now...” The sound of Gloria blowing her nose.

“Okay,” Patty’s voice croaked like a frog’s.

“Oh, one more thing. They *do* let us have newspapers in here, as long as we don’t spend too much time reading them. And I read in the obituaries yesterday that Bob

Carston died. You know, the man who built our house? Tell Jessica for me, will you? Maybe she can send a card to Ida. Give her my sympathies.”

“I’ll tell her,” sniffed Patty.

“Mom?” It was David. His voice was calm and even.

“Yes, hon?”

“You’re not a bad mother.”

More crying on the line. “I have to hang up now. I love you guys.”

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Walking home with Johann to his house the next day, Patty thought again about how much to tell him. About that day, about why her mother was sent to the hospital. Johann, meanwhile, was thinking out loud about how to spend his birthday money.

“So I haven’t made up my mind yet between a pair of binoculars or a whole collection of Jimi Hendrix records. If I get the binoculars, I’ll have to use some of my savings because I didn’t get enough to buy the pair I want. But if I buy the binoculars, I’ll have nothing left for the records. And if I buy the records, I’ll have to wait until Christmas to buy the binoculars. And what is there to look at around here that time of year? All the birds will be gone. If I were back in South Africa--”

“*Enough* about South Africa -- I’m *sick* of South Africa! I wish my biggest problem in the world was what to spend my stupid birthday money on! Want to trade lives with me?”

Johann stopped and stared at her. “What’s the matter with you?”

Patty didn't know how to answer. It had all come flooding out of her without warning. Before she even knew it, she was yelling at him.

"I'm sorry...I'm...I'm stupid."

Johann dropped his arms at his sides and rolled his eyes. "For the ten thousandth time: You. Are. Not. Stupid." He kicked the toe of her sneaker for emphasis. "I don't make friends with stupid people. But you are acting very strangely. You have been all week."

"I have?"

"Yes. I don't think you should yell at me for no reason."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

They walked in silence for a while.

"How's your mum? Is she getting better?"

Patty took a deep breath.

*I'm going to tell him now. Now. Here goes.*

"There's something about her going to the hospital that I didn't say before."

Johann turned to her and waited. They were walking a lot more slowly now.

"Just before we found her in the bathroom, both TVs went haywire at the same time. Even though one of them's cable. And then, Jessica and me, when we were trying to figure out what was wrong with the TVs, the radios all turned on at the same time – really loud. We had to go around and shut them all off. That was how I figured out my mom wasn't in her room like I thought."

"The Ghost Lady!" said Johann. He stopped in front of Patty, blocking her path, practically jumping up and down with excitement.

“Are you saying the TVs and radios went crazy, and because of *that* you found your mother in the bathroom?”

“Not breathing. Jessica got her breathing again. Before the ambulance came.”

Johann grabbed Patty’s arm and shook it. “Do you realize what that means? The Ghost Lady saved your mother’s life!”

“I know! That’s what I’m trying to say.”

“And that’s why you’ve been acting like this? But Patty, that’s a good thing, not a bad thing!”

“I know but...”

*I know but... the rest of it.*

“We’ll have to get back to do another séance. And this time, we won’t be interrupted. This time we’ll--”

Johann stopped and looked at the sidewalk. Then he squeezed her arm so hard it hurt.

“Patty – the message. *She is in danger*. It wasn’t about your father’s girlfriend. It was about your mother!”

Patty blinked her eyes hard. She had forgotten all about the message from the séance.

“But then...what did she mean about Lorraine?”

“Sweet Lorraine? That’s the part we need to figure out. The first part of it is solved. Don’t you see, it was two messages, not one! The first message; *she is in danger*, that was trying to warn you about your mother being sick!”

Johann definitely knew more than she did. About ghosts, anyway. He still didn't know what kind of sick her mother was. And she still meant to tell him, except there was his house, and there was his mother standing on the lawn with her arms folded, waiting for them. Johann ran up to her, leaving Patty standing there.

“Mum, can you drive us to Patty's house? Right after tea, I mean?”

“Darling, today is not the best day...for that.” She placed her hand on his head and stroked his hair and something in her eye catching the sunlight, almost like a tear made Patty's chest tighten. “Your father's coming home early today, and we're all going to sit down and...spend some time together.”

“Why? What's the matter?” Johann's voice had gone hard and flinty. He took a step backwards from his mother, his fingers tightening around his books.

“Nothing, dear. Nothing at all. If you like, Patty can stay for tea, but then your father will be coming and--”

“It's okay, Mrs. Van Hout. I gotta be home early anyway,” Patty lied.

“Are you sure, dear?” Patty could tell she was just being nice.

“Yeah. But thanks, anyway.”

Patty began walking to the bus stop, and as she turned to wave goodbye to Johann, their eyes met, and there was an expression there she had never seen before. The blue of his irises had gone dark, and for some reason she remembered her father, him in the living room, holding *Being and Nothingness*, standing in the cookie-cutter hole where he used to be. It left a tight feeling in her chest.

Waiting for the bus to come over the hill, looking up the tree-lined street as the shadows lengthened, she thought again of the day they almost had a fight. Johann telling her his family was not perfect. *If you only knew...*

What was it he was going to tell her?

What was it he had almost said but didn't?

## Chapter Nineteen

That night, Jessica was out at a friend's house and David was at play rehearsal. It seemed like David had actually found some friends, finally. Patty couldn't believe the play rehearsals really went that long, so he was probably going out afterwards. A couple of times, when he came home, she heard him talking to some other kids just before he came in the house.

Patty knew she should be happy for him, but it was hard, with him acting like such a butthead. Since that big fight with Dad, it was like he'd decided to boycott the entire family. His whole life was school, the play, and hiding in his room. It was like having a stranger renting space in their house. And that Saturday, they were both supposed to go meet with the family outreach people from the Rehab place, and then go to an Alateen meeting. When Jessica showed him the letter from the Rehab place, David had just laughed; a mean, kind of snorting laugh that told Patty she would probably be going to this meeting alone.

She had to tell Johann. Already it was a problem, because they had talked about going to the zoo with Linda on Saturday, and now Patty either had to lie to both of them

about having to go to the Alateen meeting, or be honest about what was really going on.

But what if she told him and he started feeling sorry for her? His family was so close, his mom always there when he came home, his father coming home early so they could “spend some time together.”

Only Johann hadn't seemed too happy about it.

From Gloria's room, Patty heard a scraping noise, then the clinking of glass. She looked up from her sketchbook, where she had been drawing whales, and stopped breathing to hear better. She knew that sound. It was coming from the marble top of her mother's antique dresser, in front of the attached mirror, “a vanity,” one of her mother's friends had once called it. There was a collection of stuff on the dresser: perfume bottles, deodorant, candles, makeup, and a little ceramic tree with holes where you hang your earrings so they don't get all tangled up. When Patty was little, she liked to play with the earring tree, picking them out of their holes, running her fingers along them, jingling them.

That was the sound she was hearing now.

Somebody was playing with the earring tree.

The clinking and scraping got louder; things were being pushed around on her mother's dresser. Why did both Jessica and David have to be out? The Ghost Lady wasn't so scary when somebody was home.

Suddenly, she heard a new sound. This one she had never heard before. A hard clapping on the floorboards, like someone wearing hard-soled shoes: slower, louder, more serious than the Ghost Lady's footsteps.

Yes, by now, Patty knew the sound of the Ghost Lady's footsteps: quiet, flat, little pats, nothing to make an echo, never making the floor creak. These steps were completely different.

The clinking and shuffling continued on one side of the room, while from another direction, the footsteps grew louder. Pacing back and forth.

A sharp whisper cut through the air. Patty could feel it slicing through her body the instant she heard it, a voice like a physical force, a beam that penetrated right into her body.

It was a man's voice.

A woman's voice answered, the voice cutting through the air, both voices, somehow louder than normal voices, even though they had no tone, no pitch.

The voices rose, echoed off her bedroom walls, bounced around on the inside of Patty's skull, flaring up, then damping down like flames, like no sound of this world at all.

Patty's heart pounded in her chest, thumped in the hollow of her throat. She dropped the pencil she'd been drawing with and pulled her knees up to her chin. She didn't know whether she was shaking with fear or the sudden cold in the room, but her trembling was so violent, her bed was shaking.

The rocking chair began creaking back and forth. From the other side of the room, the bedsprings crunched as somebody sat down. The voices grew louder.

If it weren't for everything else that had happened until that moment, Patty might have thought it was two burglars, going through all of her mother's stuff, trying to decide what they wanted, discussing it. Trying to agree. Two intruders, who had somehow

materialized without having walked in a door, without having walked up the stairs, or even woken up Jinx.

No, a person would have to be very stupid to think it was burglars.

The rocking chair was dragging across the floorboards now, both footsteps closer, right outside Patty's door. The coat-hangers in her mother's closet began jangling and shifting along the bar; the clothes being rifled through. The voices were closer than ever. If Patty opened the door leading to her mother's room, she could touch them.

Them. Not her. *Them.*

The voices were loud enough that Patty should have been able to understand the words, but they were like no words she'd ever heard. It was like English, only in pieces, syllables she recognized, but strung together in a way that seemed to wander off somewhere else, away from her understanding, somewhere she wasn't meant to follow.

The doorknob just under the Jimi Hendrix poster rattled. Then turned.

Patty made herself as small as possible, flattened her back against the wall, pushed as far as she could into the corner. The door opened. A strip of black about four inches wide cracked open, the portal to her mother's room. The words cut through the air.

--*Who is it?*

--*Patty.*

She wondered if a person could die from their heart beating too hard – if it could just explode out of her chest and splat against the wall.

A rapid exchange of whispers – once again, she couldn't understand the words. Then the door closed. The bedsprings crunched down one more time, and Patty heard Gloria's bedside lamp click on.

*You have to get out of here.*

The words in Patty's mind were clear and decisive; the exact opposite of the whiplash, scattershot ghost voices -- voices that hit her like frozen rain. She didn't know where that calm advice was coming from, but she was going to follow it.

She unbent her shaking body and her feet found the floor. Her palms pushed her up from the bed into a standing position and she inhaled sharply.

All noises stopped in the next room. It was completely, utterly silent.

Patty heard the sound of the attic door opening, then a sudden rush of what sounded like wind filled with dead leaves howling up the attic stairs. The door slammed shut behind it.

The last thing Patty remembered after she escaped the house was Jinx lying on the couch, lifting his head in confusion as she fled out the front door. She didn't stop running until she got to Linda's house, twelve blocks away.

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The hard part was having to explain to Linda's mother why she had shown up at ten pm with no jacket, wearing only socks and no shoes.

As she sat down on Linda's bed and took off her ruined socks, she could hear Linda talking to her mother in the hallway. She couldn't catch all the conversation, but she heard Linda's mother say, "it must have been a pretty bad nightmare to scare her that much."

What is the problem with adults? Why do they all say that? *It must have been a nightmare.* You could have ten ghosts parading through your house every night doing the cha-cha, and they'll say it must have been a nightmare. Why even bother talking to them?

Patty gritted her teeth and rubbed her stinging eyes, hoping, praying Linda's mother wasn't convincing her to think the same way. She knew how much Linda wanted to be an adult; how hard she tried to be taken seriously. What she heard was Linda saying, *I'm going to go see how she is.*

"My mom is going to bring us some Swiss Miss."

"With mini marshmallows?" Patty asked, hopefully.

"Of course," said Linda, as if the question were preposterous.

Patty's arms and legs felt like limp spaghetti. Her heart was still beating too fast, and she had a feeling her feet would hurt the next day. But for now, she couldn't feel anything but a kind of rattled stupidity, like a fish that just got taken off the hook and placed back in the water.

Linda sat down beside her and put her hair behind her ear. She was wearing long johns with little pink daisies, a huge yellow t-shirt. Patty didn't have anything to wear to sleep in. Not that she would sleep much tonight, anyway. She knew Linda would lend her something if she asked.

"Patty, are you sure that--"

"Linda, please don't ask me if I'm sure." Patty looked at her in a way she hoped didn't look angry, because it wasn't angry, really. She was only in Linda's house because her house was the closest. She hadn't meant to make her problem Linda's problem, or Linda's mom's problem.

Why couldn't Johann be the one who lived close by?

"It's just that – sometimes our minds play tricks on us. And with your mother in the hospital and everything, I can see where you might be more scared than usual about staying home by yourself. Your house is very big, and makes a lot of noises – odd noises, I admit. And I'm not saying that I don't believe you, but could you at least consider the *possibility* that--"

"That I'm crazy?"

Linda released a frustrated sigh. "I didn't say that. Don't put words in my mouth."

So Patty *did* sound angry. Maybe she was angry. She wished she were at Johann's house and not at Linda's. And that was a mean thing to wish, because what if Linda hadn't been there? What if she had ended up with nowhere to run to? She didn't have any bus money, and the buses only came once an hour at this time of night, anyway.

"All I'm saying is that it may not be what you think. I mean, that should make you feel better, right?"

"Well, sorry, but it doesn't."

Linda's mother came in with two steaming cups of Swiss Miss. She gave Patty a little smile; warm crinkles in the corners of her eyes.

"I'm sorry I messed up your night," said Patty, accepting the cup.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I needed to take a break from typing, anyway."

Linda blew on her cup. "My mom is halfway through her dissertation."

"*Almost* halfway," her mom corrected, tweaking Linda's chin. "So, your mom knows where you are tonight, Patty?"

"My...my mom?"

“Or your brother? Didn’t you call...?”

*Jessica.* She was probably home by now. Oops.

Jessica had been almost frantic, ready to call the cops when Patty called. Patty promised her she’d explain everything the next day.

“I’m sorry, Patty! God, I never should have left you alone – what was I thinking?”

Patty told her it was okay, but Jessica kept going on about how she hadn’t been out to see her friends since moving into their house, and now she was afraid it had been a big mistake. Patty told her she was fine and promised to be home right after school the next day.

She crawled back into the sleeping bag by Linda’s bed and sighed.

“You still think it was a dream, don’t you?” she asked.

Linda rolled over towards her. “Oh, Patty, I just don’t know *what* I believe.”

“If you had been there--”

“I wish I *had* been there. Really.”

Linda reached under the bed and pulled a bag of Chips Ahoy.

“Your mom lets you keep cookies in your room?” Patty was consumed with envy.

“Of course not. I stole them from the kitchen.” Linda handed the bag to Patty.

“I don’t think you’re crazy, Patty,” said Linda.

Patty looked up at her. Linda would be pretty one day -- she could see it. She’d get contact lenses, the braces would come off, she’d start standing up straight and wearing nice clothes. She’d get boobs. And with that thick, chocolate brown hair and matching eyes and freckles on her nose, some boy would like her, a smart boy who wouldn’t be afraid of her giant brain. Patty could see Linda’s whole future. She would get

a PhD, just like her mom, and be some big-shot professor at a university. So how come when she looked at her own future, all she could see was a big blank?

“You know how Johann says, ‘I don’t have any stupid friends?’” said Linda.

Patty smiled for the first time since she walked in Linda’s door that night. She didn’t know Linda had heard him say that. He must have said it more than once.

“Well, I don’t have any crazy friends,” she said, slurping her Swiss Miss.

## Chapter Twenty

The next day, Patty felt a little weird wearing Linda’s shirt and shoes at school. The shoes were a size too big, for one thing, and she kept stumbling when she went down the stairs.

“What’s wrong with you today, Lofthaus? What’s with the clown feet?”

“Get dressed in the dark again, Lofthaus?”

She couldn’t wait for second period, where she would see Johann. She was going to tell him what had happened last night. And then she would tell him the truth about why her mom was in the hospital. Maybe if she told him first, and he didn’t act weird about it, she might consider telling Linda and Heidi.

As the students were taking their places in English class, Patty found Johann at his desk, staring out the window. It was funny -- something she might do, but not like him at all. Before class, he was usually looking over his science class notebook, making sketches of some plan to build something, or reading one of his Marvel Comics. He

didn't look up when she came into the room, and she got the strange feeling when she looked at him that he was all by himself, that there was nobody actually *in* the room but him. Maybe everybody else in the class was an illusion. There was no Mrs. Murphy writing notes on the board about adjectives of description, there were no other kids around them, pulling notebooks out of their backpacks, comparing new sneakers, giggling and poking one another. And there was no Patty, standing there two feet away from him, waiting for him to notice her and turn around.

When he did, she wondered if he was sick. He had that sick look: big-eyed, pale, purple smudges under his eyes. The expression in them made her take a step backward. It was as if looking at her hurt him – like when a doctor pokes at your swollen glands and like an idiot, says, *does that hurt?*

“Uh...hey,” she said.

“Hey.”

He bunched his eyebrows together when he noticed her shoes.

“Why are you dressed like that?”

Patty felt annoyance creeping up her throat. “It’s a long story. I’ll tell you after class. Hey, are you sick or something?”

“No.” Johann turned back to his notebook. He began drawing a spiral, smaller and smaller, coiling a snail of ink into a tight little snarled ball in the middle of the paper. The task seemed to require his whole concentration. Patty was just about to ask him again what was wrong when Mrs. Murphy told everyone to take their seats and asked for their homework. Patty, of course, didn't have it.

She sat down, hoping Mrs. Murphy wouldn't call her out in front of the class.

*Sorry, Mrs. Murphy, I was just about to do my homework when my house was invaded by ghosts who think they own the place. You see, my mother's in the drunk tank, so there wasn't anybody home but me, so I escaped my house in my socks in the middle of the night, and that's why I'm wearing these ridiculous shoes...*

She wondered what would happen if she actually said it.

And the only person in the school she could actually say it all to was sitting two feet away from her and was acting like the Living Dead. What was wrong?

All through class, her eyelids grew heavier while her arms felt shaky and jittery, the edges of her vision began to blur. The voices from last night kept echoing in her brain, and Mrs. Murphy's became just a drone in the background. She hadn't slept much on Linda's hard floor, and she was getting a sore feeling in the back of her throat when she swallowed.

Mrs. Murphy was going on about how to use adjectives to make your writing come alive. They were to take the handout with five boring sentences, and spice them up as creatively as possible.

The classroom fell silent except for the sound of pencils scratching on paper. In the end, Patty did not get her wish of being invisible in class that day.

"Patty? Would you like to be the first to share one of your sentences?"

Patty cleared her throat and winced. She was definitely coming down with something. The original sentence on the handout was about as boring as you could get.

*My room has four walls, a ceiling, and two windows.*

"My room has four listening walls, a tense ceiling, and two impatient windows."

Snickers and snorts erupted through the room.

“Now class, that’s enough!” Mrs. Murphy put her hands on her hips and shot warning looks at the louder boys. “Those are very interesting choices, Patty.”

“But Mrs. Murphy, *listening* isn’t even an adjective! It’s a verb!” Kristin triumphantly pointed out.

Mrs. Murphy corrected her, explaining that in this case, it was acting *as* an adjective in the sentence, and very creatively, too. Patty snuck a look at Johann, but he was still lost in doodling on his paper. Something was definitely wrong. Normally, something like the teacher putting Kristin in her place would at least get a smile out of him.

“What I think is most interesting, is that you chose adjectives one would normally use to describe a person – *listening, tense, impatient* – to describe a room. What were you thinking when you chose those particular words, Patty?”

Patty looked at her paper. She began to feel dizzy.

“What makes the windows impatient?” Mrs. Murphy prompted when Patty didn’t say anything.

Patty thought about all the times she looked out those windows, wanting to escape; envying the birds and squirrels leaping between the trees, the ducks quacking to each other in flight, the clouds scooting by in a rush to get to better places. She thought of the Ghost Lady, looking between the curtains, waiting for someone to come.

Is that what had happened last night?

Had he finally come?

What had Gloria said on the phone – *remember to tell Jessica. The obituary was in the paper yesterday.*

Suddenly, she heard a song in her head, an old, old song her mother used to sing to her at night when she was very little, when she didn't want to go to sleep.

*Go tell Aunt Rhody,*

*Go tell Aunt Rhody,*

*Go tell Aunt Rhody,*

*The old gray goose is dead.*

She could hear her mother's voice, singing low and soft, as clearly as if she were right next to her. She hadn't even thought about that song for years.

Patty's pencil fell from her hand onto the floor. It rolled towards Johann's chair and stopped at the foot of it. He finally looked away from his paper, at the pencil, then at her. For a second, their eyes met, and Patty felt she was looking in a mirror – his eyes as red and stinging as hers, his heart beating as fast as hers. Was there something in *his* throat, too? Something he just couldn't swallow because it hurt too much?

“Patty? Do you feel well?”

“No, Mrs. Murphy. My throat hurts. May I please have permission to see the nurse?”

“Of course, dear.”

More than a few of the kids grumbled as she went up to the teacher's desk to get the yellow hall pass.

“Man, she's *always* goin' to the nurse.”

“Don't breathe her germs, man.”

The wide, wooden tongue depressor was horribly dry and sent the smell of rubbing alcohol up her nose.

*Can you believe some people have actually tried to drink rubbing alcohol in here?*

Patty felt a throw-up sensation in the back of her throat and gagged. The nurse quickly pulled out the stick.

“I know, it’s no fun, is it? Well, you’re tonsils are the size of walnuts and you’ve got a temperature of a hundred and one. It looks like strep throat again, Miss Lofthaus. This is the second time you’ve had it this year, isn’t it?”

Patty nodded.

“Has your doctor mentioned having them taken out? Your tonsils?”

“He doesn’t believe in it. He says it could go to worse places if I didn’t have the tonsils.” Patty remembered that conversation, between Doctor Fisher and her mother. Gloria had asked him asking all kinds of gross questions, about strep infections of the spleen, ears, and intestines, until Patty thought she might puke. After that, Patty had to give up her fantasy of lying on the snowy white hospital sheets and being brought endless bowls of ice cream and watching all the cartoons she wanted. The tonsils were there to stay.

“Well, Missy, I am sending you home. Is there someone who can come pick you up?”

Patty called home and Jessica hadn’t left for work yet, fortunately. Twenty minutes later, her little green car pulled up.

“Get in, sicko,” she said, leaning over the stick shift to push the passenger door open. “You know why this happened, right? You ran out of here without a jacket last

night and it couldn't have been 45 degrees out. You scared the crap out of me, you know that?"

She was starting to sound like Gloria.

"Now I gotta get you to the doctor, and you have to help me on this one, because I haven't been able to get your mother on the phone -- they're in some kind of treatment seminar thing, and it goes until 5:00, so before I scream emergency and get them all up our asses, can you tell me who your family doctor is, and where he's at?"

"Easy," said Patty. She had been there so many times that year, she could have given Jessica directions blindfolded.

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It felt good to be back in her own bed again, and with the sun still in the sky, she wasn't scared yet. Jessica was playing Neil Young on the stereo downstairs, not too loud, but just loud enough so Patty could hear, and know that she was there. She could only lie on her right side, because the doctor had put the penicillin shot in her left butt cheek this time, and there was a big sore spot. But as long as she didn't swallow, nothing else hurt. Patty was reading Alice in Wonderland for the nine millionth time, which is what she always wanted to read when she had strep throat. There was something about the weird, floaty feeling of a breaking fever, the whoosh of penicillin through her veins, the rushing sound of fluid draining from her ears, that went perfectly with Alice in Wonderland.

After a while, Jessica came in with a cup of tea with lemon and honey.

"Here ya go, kid."

Patty sat up and Jessica sat on the edge of the bed. She watched while Patty sipped the tea. The sunlight coming in through the window lit up the edges of her hair. She was like a perfect painting in a museum.

“You know, what you were telling me on the phone last night – about what you heard up here, I’ve been thinking about it.”

“You think it was a bad dream, too? Like Linda’s mother thinks?”

Jessica looked at her a moment and then at the ceiling. The tense ceiling.

“Let me just ask you a question. Has that ever happened to you before? Has a dream ever scared you so bad you ran out of the house?”

“No. Never.”

“I’m asking because...because I know it’s hard having your mother gone so long. This is a hard situation, and it was wrong for me to go out last night. I should have--”

“That wasn’t it. I wasn’t scared. I’ve been in the house alone before. I’m not a baby.”

“I didn’t say that--”

“And it *wasn’t* a dream. It wasn’t. Because I always know it’s a dream as soon as I’m out of bed. Then it’s like reality takes over, and I’m on the other side of it. And there’s a whole difference between the dream and the reality. You know what I mean?”

Jessica nodded. “Actually, yeah, I know what you mean.”

“And that didn’t happen this time. It didn’t happen when my feet hit the floor, it didn’t happen when I was going down the stairs, or when I was going out the door, or when I was running down the sidewalk in my socks – don’t you think if it was a dream,

that stuff would have woke me up? That I would have been like, “oh, thank God, it was just a dream,’ and gone back to bed?

Jessica looked at her very hard then shook her head. Her eyes dropped down to her rounded belly and she stroked it, biting her lower lip.

“Jessica? Do you think I’m crazy?”

She looked up. “No. I didn’t think it before, and I don’t think it now. You and me both know there’s something weird going on in this house, whether your brother wants to see it or not. We were both there when the TVs and radios went bananas, weren’t we?”

Patty nodded.

“Alright then. So that’s the last time I want to hear you talking about being crazy, you hear?”

Patty nodded.

“And I’m not leaving either of you guys alone in this house at night again. I promise. Okay?”

Patty’s eyes stung at the corners and her fingers trembled. She put down the tea cup.

“Jessica? Would it hurt the baby if I hugged you?”

Two tears spilled down her cheeks and Jessica put her arms around Patty.

“Will you stay here tonight?”

“I already called in sick to work, honey. I ain’t going nowhere.”

Jessica got up to leave. “You get some rest, now.”

“Wait, don’t go yet.”

She paused at the door.

“Something I forgot to tell you. That Mom told me to say.”

Jessica released the doorknob.

“She said Bob died. The man who sold us the house. She said it was in the papers the other day, and to send Ida a card.”

Jessica’s mouth dropped open and she grabbed the doorframe like she was losing her balance.

“Oh, my God, honey. That’s...”

“That’s what’s happening, isn’t it?”

Jessica put her hand over her forehead. “Oh, sweet Jesus.” She sort of fell against the doorframe and stared down the hallway, holding her head like that. A door slammed downstairs.

“That’s your brother. Listen, hon, I’m going downstairs to talk to him. Then I’m going to see if I can find that obituary. I haven’t looked at the papers since Sunday.” She shook her head. “Holy Christ...”

“Do you think that’s what’s happening?”

“Baby, let’s you and me take this one step at a time, okay? Nobody’s been hurt, and nobody’s getting hurt. Not as long as I’m around, you understand?”

Patty nodded.

“So don’t you be afraid.”

Patty lay back and listened to Jessica’s footsteps down the stairs. Eventually she fell asleep with the book next to her, and didn’t wake up until it was dark.

## Chapter Twenty-One

It was a bang and a shout from downstairs that awoke her. She turned on the light. Her mouth was dry and tasted nasty. She took a sip of the tea that had gone ice cold next to her bed. She heard David's feet on the stairs and soon he was knocking at her door.

"Hey, germ-face! You up?"

"Yeah," Patty rasped.

He pushed open the door. He was holding a steaming cup of Campbell's chicken noodle soup. It smelled all salty and chickeny.

"Jessica says for me to bring you this." He set the cup next to her bed. "Man, you wouldn't believe what just happened downstairs."

The spoon was too hot to eat from. She took it out and laid it down to cool.

"What? What happened?"

"Jessica was making the soup, and I was putting the frozen pizza in the oven, and suddenly, the door to the basement just flew open by itself. It hit the wall – just went bang! Jessica swears it was locked, but that's impossible, right?"

"Right."

"Anyway, it scared the crap out of her – you should've seen it! It must have been the wind, except..." He leaned back against her door frame with his hands behind his back and looked down the hallway exactly as Jessica had done.

"Except what?"

"Except the other door was closed..." His brows bunched together and he bit the inside of his cheek. Then he looked at her. "You gonna eat that, or what?"

“It’s gotta cool first, dummy!”

“Too bad you can’t eat real food. We’re having Tombstone pepperoni pizza and Jolly Green Giant peas for dinner, and raspberry Jell-o for dessert.”

“I can eat the Jell-o.”

“Yeah, if I don’t eat it all first.”

“You better not.”

Patty’s bedside light began flickering. Just as she turned around to look at it, David saw something and ran into the hallway.

“Damn! Did you see that?” He ran back in her room. “The hallway light was doing it, too! I’m gonna go see what’s going on.”

As he started down the stairs, he added, “The power better not be going out! It’s almost time for Rockford Files!”

“Wait!” Patty yelled. She didn’t want to be alone.

Another shout from Jessica from downstairs. This one was more like a scream. Patty clutched the cup of soup to her chest. She looked around the room.

“Bob?” She said it to the air in front of her. It felt stupid.

“Bob, is that you?”

More banging and commotion from downstairs.

“Because if that’s you, you need to know you’re scaring people. And it’s not nice. I know you’re a nice man, because I met you when you were alive. You didn’t seem like a scary guy then, so what’s your problem now?”

After a while she heard Jessica’s footsteps on the stairs.

She came in with a glass of water and a bottle of St. Joseph's aspirin. Her eyes were twice their normal size.

"Came up to see how you were doing," she said. Her voice was shaky and out of breath.

"What's David doing?"

"He's on the couch, waiting for Rockford Files. But I got him going through the papers with a pair of scissors looking for that obit."

"How do you get him to do stuff? Nobody else can get him to do stuff."

"No, that's not true, hon. You know, he couldn't be in that play if that was true. He's got to listen to the director and show up on time, and remember his lines and all that. He's just a little stubborn is all. Stuff makes him mad. He reminds me of my baby brother. He was like that. Here, take two of these." She handed Patty two baby aspirin, and she took them, savoring the bitter, orange bite of them.

"Jessica! I found it!" came David's voice up the stairs.

"Finish that soup if you can, and I'll be back up in a jiff. We got Jell-o downstairs, too."

Patty made herself smaller as soon as Jessica left the room, bringing her knees up to her chest. She took another spoonful of soup and continued her conversation with Bob.

"So, how come you're doing this, huh?" she said. "That's what I mainly want to know."

She took another spoonful of soup and waited. Nothing happened.

“Why are you messing around with our lights and our garbage disposal? Huh? Is it ‘cause you think this is still your house? Because it’s *our* house, now, in case you didn’t notice. You remember selling it to us? Remember?”

“And who’s the Ghost Lady? Where do you know her from?”

Once she got going, it didn’t feel so stupid anymore. The air around her tightened in that way that was becoming familiar now. Knowing that Jessica was downstairs made all the difference. If only she’d been this brave last night. She spoke again, louder.

“It’s *our* house, Bob. You know that. So why are you here?”

Jessica’s footsteps came up the stairs again. This time, she appeared with a cup of Jell-o in one hand and the newspaper clipping in the other.

“Okay,” she said, sitting down on the bed. “This obit has got a ton of stuff in it. All about his work with the parks department, his fundraising with the Lions Club, and listen to this: “Robert Curry married Alice Wentworth in 1938, daughter of a dairy distributor from Osh Kosh....blah, blah...Today he is survived by their three children--”

“But Bob’s wife’s name is Ida.”

“His *second* wife. This first one died in 1965. Says right here.”

Patty took the article from Jessica and read.

*Alice Wentworth Curry, who died on January 17, 1966, from complications after undergoing brain surgery for a cancerous tumor...*

She looked up at Jessica. She said the name out loud.

“Alice. Alice Wentworth. Alice Wentworth Curry.”

The words were heavy, weighty, like a cannon ball shot through the air. She had a name.

The Ghost Lady had a name.

*In April, 1968, Mr. Curry was remarried to Ida Cox, who worked 21 years as University of Wisconsin librarian and survives him, living in Richland Center today with her son and his family. The two were prominent members of the Wisconsin State Historical Society, and spearheaded efforts to establish the first home for battered women on Madison's west side...*

“But what about the first wife? About Alice? All it says here is that that they had three children.”

“Well, hon, raising three kids keeps you busy. Maybe she didn't have time to do much else.”

“But where did she die? Did she die in the hospital? Did she... did she die in this house?”

Jessica looked over her shoulder at the article.

“It doesn't say, does it?”

A rippled lock of Jessica's hair fell on the paper and she flipped it back. “Hon, are you thinking what I'm thinking? About all this?”

“Maybe. What are you thinking?” Patty held her breath.

“Everything.” Jessica took a deep breath and crossed her legs under her. “That first night, when it felt like a lady looking in on me. And now all this – this craziness. It’s them, ain’t it? I mean, don’t you think?”

Patty grabbed Jessica’s hand and squeezed it. “I knew she was a lady from the beginning. I always knew, as soon as we moved in here. And Mom didn’t believe me, and David made fun of me...” tears were streaming down her face now, and her throat ached horribly trying to keep them back. Jessica wrapped her in her arms.

“Of course you did, hon. Kids hear things older people can’t hear. Everybody knows that. And it all gets blamed on the imagination.”

“I know! Why do they *do* that?”

“Oh, honey, haven’t you noticed how old folks get hard of hearing? Always saying, *what?* And *speak up!*”

Patty laughed and wiped her face on her sleeve.

“Don’t cry now, it’s bad for the tonsils. Here, eat your Jell-o.” Jessica handed her the bowl.

Patty didn’t have to try too hard to convince Jessica to let her come downstairs and watch *Rockford Files* with them. Jessica brought the pillow and blanket downstairs and made up the couch as her sickbed, exiling David to the corner of it, where he poked Patty’s feet with a fork whenever they strayed into his territory. None of them talked about the ghosts. They knew why they were all huddled together in that one small room, in the glow of the TV, with the whole huge, creaking, dark house around them. Nobody wanted to get up from the couch, even to go to the bathroom. But just for one hour, they were going to try to pretend it was a normal evening.

Patty wondered if Jim Rockford could help them.

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It was a little after midnight when Patty was woken up from a dream that she was having a fight with Marsha from the Brady Bunch. She had just picked up a wad of mud to smear into Marsha's hair, when she was jerked awake by a loud banging from downstairs.

At first, she thought Jessica and David must still be awake. But when she went to the door and pushed it open a crack, nothing but darkness greeted her, and both their bedroom doors were closed.

The noise from downstairs was a shuffling, bustling kind of noise. Patty crept to the foot of the stairs and peeked down. The only light was a dim illumination from the streetlight outside. A man's whispered voice said something muffled from one corner of the room. A woman's voice answered. Then another sound cut through the whispers: Jinx's toenails across the floorboards. He appeared at the foot of the stairs, his eyes reflecting the bathroom nightlight behind Patty's head, two green disks glowing in the darkness. He turned his head, looking into the living room, and whined through his nose. Patty could see the tip of his tail waving tentatively, silhouetted against the light from the window.

*Some can't make themselves seen, some can't make themselves heard.*

Could any of them make themselves *smelled*?

Did ghosts have a smell to Jinx? Patty remembered her father telling her once that dogs see the whole world through their noses; that they could memorize the smells of a

hundred different people; that they decided whether they liked you or not from your smell; that they could smell friendliness or fear.

If the ghosts had no smell, did they even exist in Jinx's world?

Still whining, he trotted up the stairs to where Patty was standing, wrapped himself around her legs once, and looked down. Waves of shivers ran through him, as if he'd just been pulled dripping from the bathtub. The two of them stood there together, looking down the dark depths of the stairwell. The whispers got louder, once again, cutting through the air, and she could feel their voices cutting through her body as she shrank against the wall.

"It's just an old man and an old lady. That's all. It's Bob and Alice. That's all. They aren't here to hurt us." Patty whispered it to Jinx, stroking his trembling head all the while, but she knew she was really saying it to herself.

*Bob and Alice.*

Through the shifting whispers, an electronic snap pierced the darkness, and a pattering of gentle jazz piano notes filled the room. Then a voice like chocolate cream began to sing, filling the room:

*I've just found joy,*

*I'm as happy as a little boy...*

"What the hell?" Patty's fingers gripped Jinx's fur, which was now standing up like a raccoon's, all along his back.

*A pair of eyes  
that are brighter than the summer skies  
when you see them you will realize  
why I love my sweet Lorraine.*

She'd heard the song before. Her mother had it on an old record she used to play while she was ironing, back when Patty was in kindergarten. Back when her mom still ironed, and had special ironing music for it. Frank Sinatra was also ironing music. What was this guy's name? Another old guy from a long time ago.

*Now when it's raining I don't miss the sun  
Because It's in my baby's smile*

The door to Jessica's room squeaked open and Jinx turned and whined in that direction. Her bedroom light clicked on and she came down the hall, wrapping her bathrobe around her.

"What are you doing up? You got the radio on, Patty?"

"Shhh!" Patty grabbed Jinx's collar and pointed downstairs. Jessica stopped and looked down the stairwell.

"Did you turn it on?" she whispered.

Patty shook her head.

Jessica put one hand over her lips and one on her belly. Jinx wedged himself between them and growled down the stairs.

*Each night I pray*

*That no one will steal her heart away*

*I can't wait until that lucky day*

*When I marry sweet Lorraine*

Patty's knees turned to ice cream and she grabbed the railing to keep from falling.

"Oh, my God. *Sweet Lorraine!*"

"Okay, now listen," whispered Jessica. "I'm gonna go down there."

Patty looked up at her to see if she was crazy.

"We got to let them know we aren't scared of them, Patty. It's the only way. Now you stay here if you want, but I'm going down."

Jessica gripped the railing tight. She took one step down, then brought the other foot down on the same step to meet it. She went down the whole flight of stairs that way, creeping slowly, Jinx following behind, keeping his front feet and back feet together, *kerflump, kerflump*, the way he went down steps when he was a puppy. Patty hadn't even realized she was following them until she was almost at the bottom step - the slowest staircase descent in world history. Jessica put her head around the wall of the stairwell to look, then pulled it back suddenly, flattening herself against the stairwell wall, both hands clutching her belly.

"What?" Patty whispered.

"It kicked. Oh, my God - it kicked!"

“Oh, man,” whispered Patty. This was no time for a Hallmark Moment – she wanted to see what was going on. She leaned forward to peek past Jessica.

Just on the other side of the coffee table, right by the front door, a shadow couple was dancing. A very tall shadow man and a small shadow lady, his head at least two heads above hers. But as she watched them, she realized *shadow* was the wrong word. They weren't shadows at all, but something much more alive than that. It was as if they were made up of the stuff on the TV screen when you can't tune in a station. A million trillion miniscule colored points, in the shape of two dancers, making a gray, flitting, glittering commotion. They turned and swayed through the room, noiseless, swirling, concentrating, winking in and out between the furniture. A radio DJ broke in as the song faded out:

“And that was Nat King Cole, ladies and gentlemen, with his 1943 hit, *Sweet Lorraine*. Next up here on Night Owl Oldies, that master of romance, Dean Martin with *Sway*.

Patty reached behind her and grabbed Jessica's wrist, pulled her around the corner, but it was too late. The shadow couple had evaporated.

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“They were right there -- I swear it.”

Patty couldn't believe it. Jessica had chickened out. Got all the way down to the foot of the stairs, but was afraid to look once she got there.

Oh, well. At least she knew what *Sweet Lorraine* meant now.

Patty's hands were still trembling as she sipped the cocoa Jessica made. It was about a hundred times better than Swiss Miss, and felt good on her sore throat.

"So, two of them? You're sure?"

"Why? You think we need more?"

Jessica laughed, with the little snort at the end, and a little of the trembling went out of Patty's arms. Jessica had shut off the radio, turned on all the lights and put Neil Young on again, not loud enough to wake up David, but loud enough to let the ghosts know it was no longer the Old Folks Dance Hour at the Lofthauses.

"You know, you're turning into a very funny kid," Jessica said. She poured the second cup of cocoa and blew on it.

"This is as good as what my mom makes."

"Easiest thing in the world. Hershey's cocoa, sugar and milk. Stir it up like crazy while it's heating up, don't let it boil. That's what gives it a skin on top, the boiling."

"I never knew that."

It felt stupid, chattering on like that. But it didn't matter what they were talking about, as long as they were making the noise of conversation. It felt like a contest: to see if they could make themselves big enough, if they could be *alive* enough, make enough noise to claim the house for their own. Who would win? Would it be a house for the living, or a house for the dead?

Jessica put her hand over her belly again.

"Is it still kicking?"

"Not kicking, but it moved. Like, twitched. I can't believe this, it must be all this excitement around here. Woke him up."

“Him?”

Jessica looked up from her stomach and nodded. “Yeah, I think so. I’ll know in a few weeks when they take the ultrasound.” She sipped her cocoa, then shook her head with wonder. “Good Lord, Patty, I got a living human being inside my body.”

“I know, it’s totally weird, isn’t it?”

“Kid, you have no idea…”

A loud wooden slap erupted from the back porch and the inside door flew open, letting in the cold night air. Jessica got up and ran out onto the porch.

“Now you two cut that out, you hear?” Jessica yelled into the darkness in a high, shaky voice. She got up and latched the screen door shut and ran back inside. Patty locked the second door behind her.

“Were they locked before?” Jessica asked.

“I don’t know.”

“So, that could have been the wind?”

“Is it windy out?”

“No.”

Jessica sat back down, both hands on her belly now. “Damn, it’s like I’m popping popcorn in there, for God’s sake. I swear, if this keeps up, this kid’s gonna jump out before he’s the size of a hamster.”

“Don’t say that!”

Jessica rubbed her forehead and sighed, looking through the windows of the porch door at the darkness outside.

“What are we going to do?” asked Patty.

Jessica just shook her head.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Patty stayed home from school the next day. Jessica switched shifts with someone and arranged to not leave for work until David got home that afternoon. Patty slept almost the whole day and felt much better when she woke up. Her throat barely hurt at all. The ghosts were pretty quiet during the daytime, Patty discovered. Of course, with Jessica playing the stereo all day, it was hard to tell what was going on, but Patty was just happy not to be alone in the house.

Linda called her later that evening, as she and David were eating TV dinners and waiting for M\*A\*S\*H\* to come on. Linda said she was worried because Patty hadn't been in school.

“Yeah, but I got the penicillin, so I'm almost totally better. I'll be there tomorrow. Hey, is Johann sick, too?”

“Johann? Sick?” Linda paused on the line, like it was a question that had to be thought about.

“Well, he's not exactly *sick*, but he doesn't seem normal, now that you ask.”

“Not normal? What do you mean?”

“Well, I asked him, and he didn't *say* anything. I mean, he said he was just tired, but it definitely *does* seem like there's something wrong. Maybe he has the same thing you have.”

*What? Strep throat or ghosts?* Patty wanted to say. But she knew Linda couldn't tell her anything more. She would just have to wait until tomorrow.

She hung up the phone and ate the last of the apple cobbler dessert from the tiny foil compartment in the corner of her TV dinner tray.

"So you can eat everything now? Too bad. Means you're going back to school tomorrow," said David.

"It's not too bad. I get to get out of this crazy house."

David gave her a distracted look and she was reminded of how in the Lord of the Rings, when a person looked like that, the book always said, "a shadow crossed his face." Patty knew what it meant now.

"Man, if *you're* happy to be going to school, there's definitely a problem," he shook his head.

"Well there *is*, isn't there?" said Patty. She wasn't even looking at the TV now. "A problem, I mean."

David looked down and picked the pellets of fluff off the crocheted blanket wrapped around Patty's feet.

"You mean besides Mom being in Rehab?"

"Yeah, besides that." For the first time, Patty actually considered whether her mom might actually be lucky to be in Rehab, where things were probably calm and quiet, Listerine rules or not.

"I mean," David said, softening a little, "there's been some weird stuff going on, that's for sure. But I'm not ready to say it's a ghost yet. I don't believe in things that have no scientific evidence."

“Oh, come on, David. The old guy who sold us this house dies, and then two days later, everything goes crazy? Lights and radios going on by themselves? Doors opening and closing? Noises, voices--”

“I haven’t heard any voices--”

“Well I have!”

David turned his eyes back to the TV set. “I think Klinger looks good in that negligee, don’t you?”

Patty kicked him with her blanket-covered feet.

“Ow! Man, what do you want me to say? You heard voices, so you want me to believe you? I wasn’t there, so I can’t say, right?”

“Yeah, wait until they come into your room.”

“*They?*”

Patty couldn’t believe how stupid he was. “Yes, dummy, there’s *two* of them. Ask Jessica.”

David rolled his eyes. “This place is insane.”

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Patty had been trying to talk to Johann all day, but each time she caught him in the hallway, he said he couldn’t talk, that couldn’t be late for class, which was weird, because he’d never said that to her before. It gave her the most horrible cold feeling in her stomach. His eyes were funny, too. Still red around the edges, kind of flickering, like a candle flame trying to stay lit in the wind. She didn’t hear a single thing the teacher said

in math class, not that that was anything different than usual. She couldn't stop thinking about him.

She was waiting now by his locker. She felt totally stupid doing it, but it was a guaranteed way to intercept him so he couldn't keep avoiding her. Whenever another kid walked by, she pretended she was on her way somewhere – the water fountain or the bathroom; then she'd circle back to the locker and pretend not to be waiting.

When she finally spotted him, he was all the way down at the end of the hallway, carrying a few books under his arm. They nearly dropped to the floor when he looked up and saw her. He gathered himself and straightened up, looking left and then right, as if for an escape route. Patty felt her face flush. It was a stupid idea to have come here. Incredibly stupid to stand here at his locker, where she had been waiting for almost half an hour, and this is what she got for it.

She almost turned and ran, but then he began walking towards her, slowly, looking straight ahead. At first, she thought he was looking at her, then she realized he was focused on a point just above her head, his face frozen in that blank look he had had the first day she noticed him in music class. The kid who was so quiet, nobody even realized he was from another country.

He arrived at his locker and began turning the combination knob. His eyes shielded behind the lids, the blonde sweep of his lashes.

“So, what's up?” said Patty, wondering if he could hear how hard her heart was beating. If he could hear it from where he was standing, just inches away, a distance that felt like a hundred miles.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Nothing?” Patty swallowed. “What do you mean nothing? Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

He kept twisting the lock and pulled on it, but it didn’t open. He cursed in his other language and twisted the knob back again.

“I’ve been trying to talk to you all day, man.” Patty’s voice came out sounding high and weak. She struggled to keep it under control. If she could just act natural, maybe he would, too. “The ghosts have gone crazy in my house. You have to come over and help me. And I figured out what *Sweet Lorraine* is! There’s two of them now, and the new one is--”

“I can’t come over to your house anymore,” he said, yanking on the lock again, harder. He cursed again, in German this time.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I just can’t, okay?” He dialed the combination for a third time.

Finally, the lock popped open. He pulled the door open with such force, a pile of papers and a popsicle stick suspension bridge he’d built in science class spilled onto the floor at his feet.

“Damn it!” He turned bright red and began scooping everything together. Patty got down on the floor to help him, pushing the scattered popsicle sticks into a pile.

“No, don’t. Please. Just... Just go away, okay?”

It was as if she’d been slapped. Her brain felt like the inside of his locker, everything falling out of it in an avalanche. He had pulled out the floor, the beams that held up her ceiling. She was collapsing.

Suddenly she knew.

She knew what it was his mother had wanted to speak with him about that day. Why his father had come home early “to talk.” And this time, it was *Patty’s* face burning with shame. She pushed a pile of papers across to floor to him and stood up, feeling sick to her stomach.

“It’s because of my mother, isn’t it?”

Johann looked up, looked directly into her eyes for the first time that day. His expression was blank.

“Your mother?”

“Yes, my mother! My mother the drunk, remember? It’s obvious, isn’t it? That first day, when I met your mother, and she asked me about my parents, and I said they were divorced. I knew it then -- I could see by the look on her face!”

“Patty, what are you talking about?”

“Just admit it! You never believed that stuff about my mom fainting and having to get tests done, did you? You knew she was an alcoholic. You knew all along that’s why she was in the hospital. Didn’t you?”

“Well, I guess did sort of wonder... but what has that got to do with--”

“So what did you have to go and tell your *mom* for?”

“What? But I--”

“Oh, don’t act like you’re stupid --” Patty was crying now. “I don’t have stupid friends!” She wiped her nose on the sleeve of her sweater, leaving a slick of watery snot. It was disgusting, but what did it matter now? She had lost him.

“Your mom doesn’t want you to be friends with me anymore, right?” she said.  
“And I suppose you just said okay, right? ‘cause you *never* fight with your mother – right?”

“Patty, no. That’s not it at all!”

“Oh, stop it! I don’t need you feeling sorry for me!” She turned and ran, ran down the hallway, down the long yellow patch of sunlight thrown by the window at the end of the hall, her shadow a stretching out long and black and behind her. She didn’t stop running until she was a block from the school, her stomach was burning with pain, her tears coming so hard, they were practically choking her.

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Patty couldn’t tell Linda and Heidi what had happened between her and Johann. Only that she wasn’t talking to him. That, she figured, should have been enough, but Linda kept trying to get Patty to talk about it.

“You know, keeping all you feelings bottled up inside is very unhealthy. I really think you’ll feel better if you--”

“Linda, knock it off, okay?”

“I’m not trying to be nosey, honestly.”

“I just don’t want to talk about it, okay?”

The entire world had gone cold and gray, as if she had been dropped into the middle of the darkest December. She should have realized that having Johann as a friend was too good to be true. That someone like her could never really be friends with

someone like him. It was crazy to think someone like him could actually *like* her. A boy whose parents were still together, who still loved each other. A boy whose mother was home every day making tea for him, calling him “darling.” Whose house was clean and neat and bleach-and-lilac-smelling. She couldn’t even bear to look at her own house now. The ugly kitchen linoleum, the half-pink staircase, the dog pee stains on the Chinese rug. He had probably been feeling sorry for her the whole time, so much that he had to talk to his mom about it, and it was just too awful for their family to bear. Her mother divorced *and* a drunk. How could his mom let her precious darling be friends with such a girl? Patty had been an idiot not to see it. Not to have seen it all from the beginning.

Now she would have to find a way to get Johann out of her mind. But she had no idea how to do it. He was like a splinter that had gotten too far into her skin. She wished she could do an operation on herself and cut him out.

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That Saturday, as Patty had suspected, David found a way to get out of going to the Alateen meeting by saying he had a last minute scheduled play rehearsal. Patty was pretty sure he was lying about it, but what could she do?

Jessica brought her inside the lobby of the family outpatient clinic at the hospital and got directions from the front desk. Then she sent Patty off alone down the gleaming, white tile hallway. The fluorescent lights and hospital smells made it a sterile, frozen wasteland she had to cross to get to the door of the green-carpeted, wood paneled meeting room. A group of kids, most of them older than her --some *way* older-- were sitting in a circle on folding chairs. At the head of the circle was a woman wearing jeans and a

turtleneck sweater, and long, straight brown hair that Patty knew without looking was tied back with a leather barette.

“Hi! Welcome! What’s your name?” She glanced at a clipboard that was on her lap. Patty imagined her name must be on it somewhere.

“Uh, Patty Loft--”

“That’s okay, just Patty L. is fine. We’re all anonymous here, right guys?” She smiled around the room. Some people nodded. Some were examining Patty curiously. Others were just looking at the floor. The lady directed Patty to take a seat and said there would be time for introductions later. Patty noticed that some of the kids had little hard-covered blue books that they were reading out of. The lady, who introduced herself to Patty as Lisa, gave her handful of pamphlets with titles like, *Is Alateen for me?* and *Alcoholism: a Family Disease*, and *You’re Not Alone!* For some reason, looking at them made Patty feel tired. So she snuck looks at the other kids, trying not to obviously stare. Some girls were talking in whispers, some guys laughing at some joke. They definitely weren’t jocks. Some of them looked like the tough kids that smoked cigarettes out on the school playground by the back fence. She didn’t recognize any of them, thank God.

“Okay, gang, it’s time to start the service!” Linda clapped her hands once to bring everybody to order. Then she read to them from a piece of paper in a three-ring binder all about what Alateen was, and who it was for, and how they were all there to share their feelings for exactly three minutes each but not talk back to anyone else’s feelings, which was called “cross-talk.” Patty thought about how “cross” was one of Johann’s words, another word for angry, only when Johann said it, it sounded so much prettier than angry. Thinking about Johann made her head hurt, so she didn’t hear the rest of the introduction.

Suddenly it was time for the “newcomers” to introduce themselves. Patty was sure she’d screw it up somehow. Why couldn’t she ever listen to directions?

“Uh, my name is Patty Lof—I mean, Patty. And, um... My mom is in rehab. For almost two weeks now, and it’s gonna be another two, I think.” The kids around her nodded, like this was all totally normal. She got a strange feeling from it, like little beams of her reality were connecting with their little beams of their reality. It was almost a floaty kind of feeling, like she was outside of herself for a moment. She tried to focus on Lisa’s face, which wasn’t quite as unsettling as looking at the other kids.

“And what brings you here?” Lisa asked.

Patty was surprised by the question. “Because they told me to come. The Detox people. Right here in the hospital.”

Some kids around the room laughed, but somehow, not in a mean way. Patty didn’t know what to make of it. It was almost like they were laughing at Lisa.

Lisa shifted in her seat a little bit, then said, “but I mean, what are you hoping to get out of Alateen?”

Patty’s mind went blank. Obviously, this was something she’d missed in the directions. Was she supposed to have prepared some reason why she was there? Besides the fact that they’d told her to go? She shrugged her shoulders.

“That’s okay, Patty, nobody’s on the spot here. Tell you what -- we’ll introduce the other newcomers, then when we get to sharing, we’ll come back around to you, okay?”

To Patty’s relief, she went on to the next person. It turned out that “sharing” meant talking about all the crappy things people’s drunk parents had done that week.

Turned out some people's parents were a lot worse than Gloria. One guy's dad beat up his little brother, and they got into a fight about it – a real fight, with fists. Other kids' parents had drug problems. A guy's mom had been driving drunk, smashed up the car and had to get face surgery. One girl's dad had just gone into detox for the third time, and this made Patty feel suddenly dizzy. It was stupid, of course, but somehow she'd never really considered the possibility that this all might not work. That the detox and the rehab might not make her mom quit drinking at all. It sure hadn't worked for this girl, the girl right across the circle from her with the bad pimples on her forehead, who kept twisting her hair around her nail-polished finger as she talked. She was almost like a robot, like she had no feelings left at all in her voice. It occurred to Patty that this girl was like the way Johann was *trying* to be, only Johann kept failing at it. Kept turning red and throwing things. After a while, Patty couldn't look at the girl anymore.

And then it was Patty's turn to talk. For a long time, nothing came out. She kept looking at the pamphlet on top of the pile in her lap, *Is Alateen For You?* and she wanted to tear it up in front of everyone and scream NO! Alateen is NOT for me! She was *not* one of these people. She did not live in a house where people were beating each other up. Nobody was snorting cocaine or getting arrested in her house. She was not going to turn into a robot who stared into space and looked like even a kick in the shins wouldn't get a reaction out of her. She did *not* belong here.

And then she heard herself starting to talk.

For some reason, she didn't talk about Gloria. She started by talking about David. About how he was the one who should really be there, not her. He was the one who needed the mental help.

“He yelled at my dad last time he came over, because my dad was talking all about how even though our mom’s in rehab, you still have to do your homework, and take showers and stuff, and my brother, like, freaks out on him, saying, like, ‘where the hell have you been’ – sorry for swearing – but then he just storms out of the house. He’s always slamming doors. And when Jessica told him about this meeting he just laughed. And then he gets *out* of it. Nobody expects him to do *anything*. And then he’s saying to my mom on the phone from rehab, “you’re not a bad mother,” after she’s all crying and stuff, and I can’t think of the right words to say, and he just says it totally perfect like he’s in a damn movie or something and –sorry for swearing again— but he probably thinks that because he’s in this play at school that he’s on stage all the time now, and then I have this friend at school who just--”

“Sorry, Patty, but your three minutes are up. Thank you for sharing.” Lisa looked around the room and opened the binder again. “And this is not to single anyone out, but I just want to remind us all us of guiding principle number four here at Alateen, that we keep the focus on ourselves. We aren’t here to criticize or analyze other people’s behavior, nor to criticize each other here in this room, nor our family members. Where do we keep the focus, gang?”

“We keep the focus on ourselves,” a scattering of voices around the circle replied, like they were reciting the pledge of allegiance or something.

*Not to single anyone out – yeah, right.* Patty’s cheeks were burning. It was pretty obvious who that little lesson was directed at. She looked at the clock.

At the end of the meeting, Lisa asked everybody to stand up, hold hands and recite something called the serenity prayer.

*We have to pray, too?* Patty groaned to herself. Outside the window she could see the branch of a maple tree, leaves bright orange against a bright blue sky. What was she doing in this stupid room? She took the hands of two girls, one on either side of her, one hand was narrow, dry and cold, the other was warm and sweaty. While everybody else was reciting the words, as if they had done it a hundred times before, which they probably had, Patty moved her lips along with them so as not to look like too much of an idiot. She wondered where the words were going. Floating up to the sky? Was there really a God up there hearing them?

*“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”*

Everybody released hands and began putting the chairs away. Patty folded her chair, thinking about the prayer. She said it again to herself.

“So, what did you think of the meeting?” the girl who had sat next to her asked. She was older, a little taller; round and red-haired. The one who had talked about her mom being addicted to valium. About how she had been tempted to take one of the pills herself that weekend, but called her “sponsor” instead.

“It was okay,” said Patty. “Interesting, I guess.”

“I liked your share.”

“My what?”

“What you had to say. You’re right. Sometimes, when people act like jerks, everybody just gives them more space to act like jerks. It’s not fair, but that’s the way it is, I guess.” She took Patty’s chair and put it in the stack with the rest. “Anyway, nothing you can do about it.”

*...accept the things I cannot change...*

“What was your name again?” Patty asked.

“Ellen. And you’re Patty, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, glad you made it here. Maybe I’ll see you next week?”

*Not likely*, thought Patty, but she nodded, just to be nice. Ellen seemed okay.

She made her way to the front entrance to meet Jessica. Lisa, the group leader walked with her, thanking her for coming to the meeting, and encouraging her to come again. But seeing as how Patty had practically wrecked the meeting by breaking the rules, she couldn’t figure out why she was being invited back.

“I just want you to understand that you’re here for yourself,” said Lisa, “not for anyone else. You can’t change the behavior of anyone in your family, and Alateen won’t make your mother stop drinking. But it can make you see things differently. So you don’t feel so lost.”

Had Patty said anything about feeling lost? Where did Lisa get that from? She got the feeling Lisa was telling her something she’d memorized. As easy for her to say as that prayer had been. What had they called it? The serendipity prayer? But Patty didn’t want to argue. Instead she nodded and said “okay” to Lisa’s invitation to come back, knowing she probably wouldn’t.

“So, how was it?” Jessica asked as Patty unrolled the car window to let in the breeze. Jessica had promised they would go for ice cream afterwards, and true to her word, they were heading to Baskin Robbins. The sunlight warmed the car seats through the windshield, and Patty leaned her head back, relaxing for the first time all day.

“It was kinda weird,” she said.

“Weird how?”

“I don’t know. Those kids are messed up.”

Jessica laughed, snorted, then stifled it. “Well, did you expect everybody to be all zippity doo-dah? I mean, it’s a support group for kids with alcoholic parents.”

“And *drug addict* parents.”

“Yeah, so some of them are gonna be messed up. Don’t you think?”

Patty looked out the window at the city turning to suburbs. “Jessica, am I messed up?”

Jessica looked at her, serious now. “What do you think? Would I ever in a million years say you were messed up?”

Patty shook her head. She was still thinking about the prayer. It had gone into her somehow, like a slice of bread into a toaster.

“Jessica, what does it mean, accept the things you cannot change, change the things you can, and have the wisdom to know the difference?”

Jessica smiled. “Yeah, I heard that one before. It’s good to remember. It’s a way to deal with whatever’s bugging you. ‘Cause there’s two kinds of trouble in life – there’s the kind you can do something about, and the kind you can’t do crap about. So when the you-know-what hits the fan, the first thing you have to ask yourself is, what kind of trouble is this? The kind I *can* change or the kind I *can’t* change?”

“And if you can’t change it?”

“Then you accept it, make peace with it and move on.”

“And what if you can’t do that? What if you *can’t* accept it?”

“Well, that’s where the God part comes in. You pray for strength, for the peace of mind to accept it.”

And there, of course was the problem. Jessica made it sound easy. She had grown up going to church. Praying for her was as natural as breathing or eating or burping. Patty had no idea how to even begin. It made her think about when they were studying Saudi Arabia in world geography class. There were two things Patty remembered about Saudi Arabia: they grew dates there, and they prayed five times a day. She suddenly envied those people. If she had to pray five times a day, maybe by now she would know how to talk to God. Or at least she wouldn’t feel like such a loser for even trying.

### **Chapter Twenty-Three**

The worst thing about what had happened with Johann was that Patty still had to see him in school every day. See him in English class, still in the same seat, forbidden to have anything to do with her, and not even standing up to his mother about it, because in his heart, he knew that his family was too good for her.

How stupid to think it would last. He had already made enemies at school by being friends with her. She had already half-wrecked any hope he had of being accepted. There was no way he’d ever be popular if he kept hanging around with her. Why couldn’t she see that he would have to do this eventually?

She didn’t know what to look at in class if she couldn’t look at the back of his head. She kept her hand shielding her eye, as if the sun were shining in it, but all she was blocking out was the light from his blazing blonde hair. That’s why she didn’t see where

the note came from when it came shooting across the floor and collided with her sneaker.

She looked down. It was folded into a triangle -- so tightly, she wasn't sure it even *was* a piece of paper until she picked it up. She looked up at Johann, but he was busily writing in his notebook. The teacher looked at her briefly, and Patty turned back to her book, hiding the triangle of paper in her hand. When everybody was pulling out their notebooks for a writing assignment, Patty quickly unfolded the note. It *was* from Johann.

*Patty, you have got it completely wrong. My parents do not even know that your mother is in the hospital, and if they did, they wouldn't tell me not to be your friend. They aren't like that. You must believe me about this.*

*The problem is that my father has got a new job. We have to move to Berkeley, California. It's going to happen right after Christmas. So, you can see that it really doesn't make sense for us to be friends anymore. I am not upset with you or anything, but I'm becoming an expert on this by now, and it really is better to just say goodbye now. California is extremely far away. I know, because I have looked it up on a map.*

*Again, it's nothing against you. This is just the way it is with my life.*

*Sincerely,*

*Johann*

Patty read the note over and over. Each time she read it, a new flood of feelings swept over her, like she was trying to keep her head above water in a stormy lake. She kept looking at Johann, trying to get him to turn around, but there he was, doing the

writing assignment, perfect little student as always. He had probably even listened to the directions. How could he be so calm?

California? *Right after Christmas?* Christmas was only a month away.

She wanted to get up and run to him, grab him by the arm and scream in protest. She wanted to run out of the room, knock over all the desks in her way, and slam the door behind her. It was all she could do to remain in her seat, to wait for class to be over so she could demand an explanation from him.

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That was the last class of the day. Patty flung her things into her locker as fast as she could, so she wouldn't lose track of him in the rush of kids heading out the door. She ran to his side just as he was heading out the main door. His eyes flickered briefly in her direction, as if to confirm the identity of the person walking beside him, but nothing more.

"You got my note?" he said after they had gotten a block from the school.

"Yes."

"So, you understand, don't you?"

"No. I don't."

Johann looked at her, hair sweeping back from his forehead. He looked older, suddenly. Older than she'd seen him look before. He pinched his lips between his teeth and let out sharp sigh.

"I didn't actually expect you to. It's alright." His eyes dropped to the sidewalk. He walked faster. Patty picked up her pace. The wind blew harder through the trees, sending a shiver through her.

“It’s *not* alright,” said Patty. “I mean, I’m glad it’s not about my mother, but...”

“Yah, I don’t know why you thought that. It was silly.”

He still didn’t look up. It was so simple for him. Did he even know that his words could make all her worst fears just evaporate in seconds? Or that other words he said could make her whole world cave in? What was it about him that did this to her?

“But why?” she said. “I don’t get how just because you have to move again, we can’t still be friends.”

Johann stopped and stood in front of her, blocking her path. He looked at her for a second then picked a house on the other side of the street to focus on.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to walk home together,” he said.

Patty’s breath stopped. A lump of pain formed in her throat, then a wave of hot anger rose out of nowhere up through her stomach.

“Why? Is your family so perfect that you don’t even *need* friends? Is that it?” she jumped at the sound of her own voice -- the sharp force in these words when they came out. She hadn’t expected it.

Johann threw his books onto the sidewalk with such violence, that Patty jumped backwards.

“You want to know?” his voice was high, out of control. “You want to know about my bloody *perfect family*?” Finally, he was looking at her full on. The corners of his eyes were sparkling with tears, and Patty realized she’d never seen him cry before. Never seen him even *close* to crying. She waited for him to say more. She wanted to know. She wanted to know more than anything. But then his eyes left hers, fell again to the sidewalk, and slowly, he began picking up the scattered books. He got up and walked

away faster than ever, and Patty followed him in silence until the red faded from his cheeks and the wooded banks of the creek loomed up beside them. Johann turned off the walk and into the trees. He dropped the books in the grass and sat down on a rock. The stream below them slipped silently by, slow and dark and leaf-choked. Patty leaned against a crooked tree, waiting a long time for him to say something. Finally, he lifted his head and began to speak, still not looking at her.

“You remember I told you that we can’t go back to South Africa. But I didn’t tell you why.”

“You said something like, it’s no good anymore.”

“It’s no good for *us* anymore.” Johann picked up a pebble and tossed it into the stream. The ripples stretched down the brown slick of water.

“My father’s best friend,” Johann continued, “he’s in prison. That’s why it was almost funny when you thought your mother being in the detox hospital would upset my parents. I mean...I don’t mean it was funny.” His eyes met hers briefly, then dropped to his shoes and he scuffed a muddy trench in the ground in front of him.

Patty sat down in the grass. “What’s he in prison for?”

Johann gripped the sides of the rock and fixed his eyes on her. He looked at her a long time. The tired smudges under his eyes looked more purple than ever in the failing fall sunlight.

“What I’m going to say to you, you can’t repeat to anyone, Patty. I mean it. You must swear. It’s very, *very* important that you don’t say it to anyone. Not to Linda, not to Heidi, not to anyone in your family. Nobody. Do you understand?”

Patty nodded. Her skin felt like the skin of a drum, tight, vibrating.

Johann bit his lower lip. “Have you seen the news on television about South Africa? My parents watch it every night. You must see it sometimes. Do you?”

Patty thought for a while. She had been noticing lately that whenever Johann’s country was in the news, they usually showed lots of black people protesting in the streets. They sang and danced as they protested, but not in a happy way. The police were white and angry. They ran after the protesters with long, whip-like sticks to beat them. They shot tear gas at them. It reminded Patty of when the police down south beat up the people who marched with Martin Luther King. Back before she was born and all the films of it were in black and white. She nodded her head.

“Well, my family -- we’re part of it. The revolution in my country that wants to make blacks equal with whites. My father’s friend is in prison for that. And *my* best friend’s father--” Johann’s voice caught. He took in a jittery breath. “He was killed. After he made a speech at a protest. They found his body six weeks later. I won’t even say how they killed him – it’s too horrible.”

Patty had to remind herself to keep breathing. She was trying to imagine it. She couldn’t. “Is your best friend black?”

Johann nodded. “Yes.”

“You never told me about him.”

“There’s a lot I never told you.”

Johann threw a wadded-up leaf down the ravine bank. “My parents are members of a banned organization.”

“Banned?”

“Illegal. Illegal to be a member of it. And if we go back there – if we...” He ran his hand through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes again, his endless, endless task. “Well, we can’t go back – that’s all. We can’t.” His eyes followed the crumpled leaf down the stream and he wiped his face on his sleeve.

“When we left for London, there wasn’t even time to say goodbye to my friends. No time pack all my things. We left tons of stuff behind. We got on the plane in the middle of the night, and that was the end of South Africa. Since then, my dad’s got to take whatever job he can get, and nothing is permanent. That part I told you. So, now it’s happened again.”

Patty opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. It was too much, way more than she could take in all at once. How had he been walking around with these secrets inside of him and not telling anyone? Was this the reason he always looked like he was alone? Even in a room full of kids -- why he had a kind of bubble of alone-ness around him that never went away? How could he stand it? Why hadn’t he told her before?

“A month is only four weeks, Patty. And then I’ll be gone.”

“But we can talk on the phone. We can write letters. We can--”

Johann got up from the rock, picked up a stick and threw it in the river. “Yah, people always say that, and then maybe one letter comes, if you’re lucky. Every one of my friends said they would write letters and call – you know how many of them I still talk to?”

Patty shook her head.

“Zero,” he said, making a little O with his thumb and forefinger for emphasis. “Not a single one. It’s like we were never friends at all. That’s just the way it is, Patty. That’s the way people *are*. So you can say, oh, yah, I’ll write, and I’ll call, but you may as well forget it.”

Patty stood up and pulled her sweater down to cover the exposed skin at the small of her back. Whether it was the wind or Johann’s voice, she was suddenly freezing cold. Colder than January, colder than when the ghosts walked in the hallway.

“I think it’s great that your family is part of the revolution,” she said.

Johann’s face drained of color.

“And I’ll never tell anyone. I promise.” She tried to think of something else to say. “You know my mom and dad are the same way. They marched in the civil rights marches, and went to protests and stuff.”

“Yah, just the same. Except they kill people for that in my country,” Johann said in a dry voice.

“Well, some people got killed *here*, too. Martin Luther King got killed. And those girls in the church in Alabama. My mom said even some white people got killed...”

Johann began digging his heel into the earth at his feet. It was obvious Patty was just making everything worse.

“Listen Patty,” he said without looking up, “I only told you because you kept saying I had a perfect family. Well, my country’s government calls us traitors, and we live like gypsies, so I can’t have any friends. Not exactly perfect, is it?” He looked at her then, a sharp flash of blue steel from his eyes shooting into her. Again, she saw that thing

in him that was also in David. Something nobody could touch; an awful, angry strength. It made every part of her hurt.

“Anyway,” he said, more quietly, “I didn’t think it was fair. That’s the only reason I told you.”

“Thanks -- I guess.”

“I have to go home.” He reached down and picked up his books, then made a diagonal path through the grass, back to the sidewalk. He didn’t turn around to see if she was following. She watched him go. She watched until he turned into a swimming blur through her tears, growing smaller down the walk, as he approached his house. His house that soon wouldn’t be his house anymore. Would Patty ever be able to stand to look at it again? Would she have to close her eyes and hold her breath like she was passing a graveyard?

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It took Patty hours to fall asleep. She had to keep turning the pillow over to the dry side because she was crying too much. Finally, she had to get another pillow. It seemed only minutes after she finally did fall asleep that she was awoken from a bad dream by a crash downstairs. She sat straight up in bed, pulling the covers around her knees, as darts of cold shot under the sheets.

*Not again.* Every night that week had been like that: broken up by footsteps, things pushed and shuffled around, the piercing whispers sucking through the air of the house. This time, whatever was happening downstairs had gotten Jinx riled up. She could hear growling and barking, and the familiar sound of his toenails scraping at the windowsill. He had scratched ragged grooves in the wood of that window over the past

two years, flinging himself at mailmen, meter readers, paperboys. Patty got up and looked out the window. A car was parked – not parked, actually, the engine was still running and she could see a man inside – right behind Jessica’s car in the driveway. The car door was open just a crack. She could see a hand on the door handle, like whoever was inside was trying to decide whether to come out or not.

Another crash from downstairs – something falling and scattering across the floor. Patty got up and ran to Jessica’s room. The door opened just as she was lifting her hand to knock. Jessica was standing there in her white bathrobe.

“Oh! Jesus, you scared me - silent, tippy-toe little thing.”

“You better come downstairs.”

“What are they up to now? Sounds like they’re tearing the house apart.”

“There’s a man in the driveway.”

Jessica had looked scared when she opened the door, but it was the kind of scared that was becoming normal for them now. The scared they all had been feeling since Bob died and everything had gone crazy. This was a different kind of fear that took over her face, and it took all the warmth out of Patty’s blood.

“What do you mean, a man? What does he look like?”

Jinx’s barking became savage. Paws digging in faster, like he was trying to tear the window out of its frame. Usually, by now somebody would have told him to shut up. Neither one of them wanted to. David’s door opened.

“What the hell is wrong with the dog? What are you guys standing in the hall for?”

The doorbell rang.

Jessica took off down the hall, but didn't turn to go down the stairs. She went into Patty's room. David and Patty looked at each other. Not knowing what to think, they followed.

Jessica was looking out Patty's window, the one with the best view of the driveway. She was standing to the side, shielding her face with the flowered curtain, peeking behind it. She pulled her head back, slowly, taking her whole body with it, until her back was against Patty's bookcase.

"It's Rick."

Jessica's voice was hollow, empty. Patty remembered the day at the hamburger stand,

*Look, we're not talking about that, you and me. Okay? I'll talk to you about anything else in the world. I mean it, kid.*

And Patty hadn't brought it up. Not once since then. Now the doorbell had ceased its ringing, and a fist instead was pounding on the door. Jinx's barking filled the house like a storm, like he could bring the plaster down from the ceiling.

David turned from the window and looked at Jessica.

"You mean *the guy*? The guy who beat you up?"

Jessica nodded. "That's his car."

"He parked it so you can't leave. So you can't drive away." said Patty.

"Shhh – she knows that, stupid."

"Open the fucking DOOR!" the voice roared up from downstairs. A higher voice than Patty had expected, more like a man who'd just broken an ankle than anything else. Still, there was an acid hatred in it, a promise of punishment that was way more scary

than anything the ghosts were doing downstairs. Jessica plunged her forehead into her hands and gripped her hair between her fingers, her body crumpled against the wall. This was somehow more horrible than anything. The air in the room was icy. Patty was unable to move in any direction, unable to think. David looked at her and then at Jessica. He straightened up, both of his hands clenched into fists, his mouth a tight line. He turned and marched out of the room. Patty tried to breathe, her heart pounding in rhythm with the barking dog, until she heard David's footsteps on the stairs. She ran to follow him, but stopped when she saw the hockey stick in his hand. It had to be a dream. This couldn't be happening.

“BITCH! I know you're in there! Open this fucking DOOR!” the voice downstairs screamed through the pounding.

“You want the door open?” David's voice boomed into the entryway, “I'll open the fucking door! I'll open the door and bash your greasy head in, asshole! Then my dog will rip your nuts off! You want me to open the door?”

Patty gripped the handrail. For once, even yelling that loud, David's unreliable larynx didn't betray him. For once, his voice didn't slip like a loose gear shift under the strain, didn't slip back into boy-voice. David sounded much bigger than he was. He almost sounded like a man.

What happened next would have been silence, except for Jinx's barking, which didn't let up for a second. He had enough beagle blood in him that he could sound like an entire pack of dogs, a bark meant to carry across acres of land and terrify foxes.

The awful voice came again, this time from the front lawn, yelling up to the second floor windows.

“You hear me, bitch? I know where you are!”

The voice continued yelling, cursing, raging in ugly blasts until the car door slammed and tires screeched as it sped away.

Patty made it to the bottom of the stairs and stood alongside her brother, the three of them, humans and dog, looking out the same window, the only sound Jinx’s low belly-growls, letting them know that he wouldn’t be sleeping that night.

“Were you really gonna do it?” Patty whispered. “Bash his head in, I mean?”

David looked at her, then at the hockey stick he was still gripping in his hand, as if he wasn’t sure how it had gotten there. His forehead was slicked with sweat.

“Only if he tried to bust in, I guess. Then I would need something to fight him off.”

“Would Jinx really have ripped his nuts off, you think?”

They looked at the dog, whose back hair was still bristled up along his back, his nose fogging up the window, eyes fixed on the corner where the car had disappeared.

Patty wished he could talk.

David let out a deep, shaky breath like he had been holding it in for a long time.

“We have to call the cops,” he said.

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It was almost three in the morning when the police finally left. They said they couldn’t do anything unless Rick actually tried to hurt Jessica, which of course, would be too late.

“You know she’s gonna have a baby, don’t you?” Patty had said to the taller cop, and Jessica gave her a shut-up look, and she knew she shouldn’t have said it, that dealing

with cops and social workers always had the rule of *let the adults do the talking*. But this other rule – that the cops couldn't do anything until Rick *did* something – couldn't they see it was stupid? Was Rick just supposed to get away with it?

“So then why did we even call them?” Patty asked, as they picked up the books and things from the mantelpiece that had been scattered on the floor when David first came downstairs. The ghosts had probably been trying to wake them up, Patty thought, as if Jinx wasn't loud enough. She swept the pieces of a broken glass paperweight together, thinking this was the kind of help they could do without.

“Because it's what you *do*,” said David.

“He's right. We have to report it, even if they can't do anything.” Jessica sounded tired. Tired and sad.

“What if he comes back?”

“We got a dog, and we got a hockey stick,” said David. He picked up the weapon and leaned it against the wall in the entryway. “Too bad Mom made us throw out that machete we found in the linen closet. That would have been good to have.”

“No, it *wouldn't* have been good to have,” Jessica said. She was rubbing her eyes, and flopped down on the couch into a fetal position, her eyelids red where she'd rubbed them. David's eyes dropped to the floor.

“I just thought...” He looked at the back of his hands. “I couldn't let him come in here. No matter what, man. What was I supposed to do? Just let him come in?”

Jessica looked up at him. She reached out a hand and grabbed his wrist.

“No. You did the right thing, honey. You scared the shit out of him. But I'm glad you didn't have to use the hockey stick.” She dropped her arm and let it flop over the

edge of the couch. Jinx walked over to her, doing what he always did when one of them was sick – he whined and licked her face.

“I tell you, this dumb-ass dog is gonna save us all,” she said, pushing him back onto the floor.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

The gym was filled with gym-smells; bleach from the shower room, the rubber of sneakers, sweat. The final round of the Presidential Physical Fitness Award competition was nearing the finish, and a much smaller group of girls, the ones who hadn't been eliminated in previous rounds, stood around the chin-up bar. They counted the seconds out loud as Tammy Schmidt gripped the bar, fixed in the chin-up position, trying to break sixty seconds. It was the kind of thing that you couldn't believe was as hard to do as it actually was. At first, pulling yourself over the bar and freezing there, you think it'll be a breeze. Maybe even the easiest (certainly the stupidest) event in the competition. Then fifteen seconds would go by, then thirty. Then the pains start shooting up the forearms, the ache deep in the shoulders, and every muscle begins to tremble. Your stomach turns to a slab of stiff cement; you forget to breathe; your face turns red.

Most kids dropped off by about forty-five seconds. Tammy, by power of sheer bitchiness, Patty figured, wasn't going to be one of these kids.

“Fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three,” the girls around her chanted with rising excitement in their voices. The girls only had to make it to sixty seconds to pass that part

of the competition, the final event. After that, any additional seconds you could force yourself to hang on would get added to your final score for the whole competition.

From the other side of the gym, the boys were finishing the rope climb and would be doing the arm-hang next. Patty forced herself to watch Tammy on the bar, even though the very sight of Tammy made her sick. Even though she knew Johann was on the other side of the gym, on the boys' side, and had already been eliminated from the competition, and had nothing to do now but stand with the other eliminated boys, watching the girls. He might even be looking at her. Wondering if she was going to make it. Or maybe he didn't care if she made it or not. She wasn't going to look his way. She would do everything she possibly could not to look his way.

“Fifty-nine, SIXTY!! Sixty- ONE!” Tammy dropped off, panting, her knees nearly folding under her as her feet hit the floor. Her friends screamed in adoration and shook her by the shoulders. The three top jock girls had passed the final event, the competition was over for them. Their awards were sealed. Patty almost expected them to run away together to Idiotland, or wherever jocks go to celebrate their victories.

“Girls, we are *not* finished yet – we have one more to go, and it's Miss Patricia Lofthaus. Are you ready, dear?”

Patty couldn't believe Mrs. Washerman was calling her “dear” now. What on earth had gotten into her? The rest of the girls quieted, settled the smirks onto their faces, and leaned aside on one foot with their arms crossed. No-one but her and the jocks were left. They looked at her like she was a dead bug in their mashed potatoes. Patty was ruining their dream moment. Despite all their nasty comments, toilet papering her house, everything they had done to humiliate her all year, here she was. It was completely

wrong. They looked at Patty's skinny arms, looked at each other and rolled their eyes. Mrs. Washerman marked her clip board.

"Been nice knowing you, Lofthaus," Tammy whispered.

"Yeah, have a nice *fall*." Kristin added.

"Girls, hush now. I'm setting the stopwatch. Are you ready Miss Lofthaus?"

Patty wiped the sweat from her palms on her shorts and stole a glance at Linda, sitting in the line against the wall with Melissa, the overweight girl that the jocks had teased so horribly during the relay races. They both smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

"I'm ready," Patty said.

She was not going to look at Johann. She was not going to look at the jocks. She looked at the iron bar, two feet above her head. Its rough, black surface – rough, she imagined, so that your hands don't slip off when you start sweating like a pig while you're up there.

"Do you need a boost up?" Mrs. Washerman said.

Patty didn't answer. The bar wasn't even as high as the lowest branch of the pine tree in the park. It was nothing to reach it. She jumped and pulled herself up. The stopwatch clicked.

Patty hung on in complete silence. Nobody counted out the seconds for her. She had no allies left in the competition.

"Fifteen seconds!" Mrs. Washerman called out.

Patty forced herself to breathe through her stomach, slowly and deeply. She kept her eyes fixed on a spot on the wall in front of her. A place where the paint was chipped. The pain started in her shoulders and crept down to her elbows.

“Thirty seconds!” Mrs. Washerman called out.

Patty’s feet wanted to kick. She kept them still, forcing the ankles to touch and the toes to point downward. She would need all the energy in her body to go to her arms.

“Maybe she’ll pee herself,” Tammy suggested. Giggles broke out.

“Girls, quiet!” Mrs. Washerman yelled, “That’s forty-five seconds!”

Patty imagined Tammy’s face. She fixed Tammy’s face in her mind, and her fingers closed like the talons of a hawk on the bar.

“Fifty seconds!”

The pain was like fire now, burning from her shoulders, down through her forearms and wrists and every cell in her body screamed to let go. She forced air into her lungs and commanded her fingers to obey her. All she needed was her fingers to hang on.

“You gotta be kidding!”

“No way!”

The ridicule had gone out of Tammy and Kristin’s voices, replaced by a kind of heated frustration.

“How many seconds now?” It was Kristin’s voice, almost a whisper, in a kind of high, uncertain tone. Something Patty had never heard before.

“Fifty-four! Fifty-five! Fifty-six!” Patty was aware, somewhere through the agony in her body, of Linda’s voice, of other girls’ voices. The girls who had been eliminated. The girls that should have been in their places along the wall, but were suddenly all around her now. The fat girls, the slow girls, the girls with glasses tied with elastic behind their heads, all of them, calling out the numbers louder, louder--

“SIXTY! Sixty-ONE, Sixty-TWO...”

Every mean thing Tammy had every said to her; every dirty look, every time she'd made one of them feel ugly, stupid, ashamed; the toilet paper covering Jessica's car. Patty put it all into her fingers, and they became fingers of iron, almost like they weren't even a part of her anymore.

“Sixty-FIVE, sixty-SIX, sixty-SEVEN!”

Patty dropped to the ground, her elbows screamed as she tried to straighten her arms. Linda's arms grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up. The eliminated girls were cheering, the fat girl held Patty's arm up in the air like Muhammad Ali winning the heavyweight championship, but Patty had no feeling in that arm anymore. Sharp teeth of pain bit into her shoulder blade, and she could tell she'd been in pain for at least a week. Tammy's face looked like it had a hole punched in it where the mouth should be. Mrs. Washerman marked her clipboard.

“That, girls, is the top score for the arm-hang this year! Congratulations, Miss Lofthaus.” Mrs. Washerman clapped her on the back. “We'll be seeing you at the awards ceremony!”

“But you didn't even total up her scores yet!” Tammy yelled.

“I don't have to. I been at this job twenty-six years, princess. Now you put that fresh mouth of yours away, and get to the showers – all of you!”

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Riding the bus home with Linda, Patty looked out the window, noticing how much lower in the sky the sun was now in the afternoon.

“You should feel pretty good about this afternoon,” said Linda.

Patty thought about it. She sort of did, in a way. The looks on the jocks' faces made every second of that torture worth it.

“Yeah. You know it’s crazy that that’s all it takes to get them to shut up. Just throw a few balls around, run back and forth, climb things, hang onto a bar.”

“Well, that’s what’s important to them, I suppose,” said Linda.

She had looked for Johann after it was over. Even after promising herself that she wouldn’t. But he was nowhere to be found. He’d probably gone right home after gym class. Not that she’d expected him to say congratulations or anything. This stuff didn’t mean any more to him than it did to her. Besides, they weren’t friends now anymore, were they?

“I hope,” said Linda, shifting in her seat to look at Patty, “that just because you aren’t athletic by nature, that you don’t think this victory is meaningless.”

“Well, it *is* all pretty stupid, don’t you think?”

Linda wrinkled her nose and exhaled in that way she did when she was trying to help Patty with her math. “If you thought it was stupid, Patty, why did you put so much effort into it?”

“To shut them up. To stick it to them. To show them how dumb their whole jock world is, and that there’s nothing special about it. Even somebody like *me* can do what they do – win their stupid award. Don’t you see? It knocks them off their high horses.”

Linda looked at her and her brown eyes turned a serious flinty black color.

“Well, does that mean you think *you’re* nothing special? That your effort is nothing special?”

“Linda. Come on. It’s *gym* class. Get real.”

“I *am* being real.” Linda seemed almost angry now. “I am being real, and I *do* think you’re something special.”

Patty tried to get Linda to look at her, but she was focused on the traffic outside the window.

“So?” said Patty, waiting for more.

“So there.”

Linda clutched her books to her chest and stared straight ahead and the back of the bus driver’s head.

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Patty no longer wanted to sleep in her room. The door to the attic kept opening and closing, even after she had propped it closed with chairs, sticks, everything she could find. She had replaced the lightbulb in her lamp twice – it kept flickering then burning out suddenly. The footsteps, voices, doors slamming – it was too much. She now slept in a sleeping bag on the floor of Jessica’s room. Jessica didn’t mind – ever since the night Rick showed up, she was having trouble sleeping, too. She had called all her guy friends and they were coming over a lot, now. Hanging around in the living room, throwing balls for Jinx in the yard, playing the stereo. They all smoked cigarettes, but Jessica made them smoke outside because of the baby. They were there to beat the crap out of Rick if he was stupid enough to show up again.

But at night, after they left, it was just the three of them, and that’s when it got scary. Because it was really the five of them, only two didn’t seem to realize that they were dead.

“Why don’t they leave? That’s what I want to know,” said Patty. She knew Jessica was still awake by the sound of her breathing.

“I don’t know, kiddo,” she sighed. “I’m getting tired of it, though, I’m telling you. I got enough going on without this.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Jessica laughed with the little snort on the end.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Just that you sound like such a little grownup. Like you got the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

Patty felt her cheeks grow hot. She was glad for the darkness. Jessica couldn’t see the look on her face. After a long silence, Jessica spoke.

“Hey, I didn’t mean anything by that. You know that, right?”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

“Is something bugging you? Something happen at school?”

She hadn’t told Jessica anything about Johann, or even about winning the fitness award. There was so much going on in the house, there didn’t seem to be any room in it for Patty’s problems.

“There’s this friend of mine. This boy. He says he doesn’t want to be friends with me anymore. ‘cause his family’s moving to California.”

“Well, that’s a silly reason not to be friends anymore. This kid know how to use a phone, or what?”

Patty laughed a laugh that felt like it might turn into crying. How had everything gotten so messed up? What was she even doing in a sleeping bag in the guest room,

talking to her mother's friend in the middle of the night? Her mother's friend who was pregnant and hiding out from her violent ex-boyfriend while Patty's own mom was in the drunk tank? How had her life turned into a bad movie?

"The thing is, nothing bad even happened with him and me. It's not like we had a fight or anything. The only reason he's doing this is because he's gotta move."

"Hmm. Sounds to me like this kid's just trying to protect himself."

"What do you mean?"

Jessica rolled over to face Patty. "I'll bet he really *does* want to be friends, but he doesn't know how to tell you that. And maybe he doesn't understand that moving isn't the end of the world."

"Oh, I think he knows a lot about moving, actually," said Patty. She knew now she had to be careful. Johann had made her swear not to tell his secret to anybody. When Jessica asked what she meant, Patty told her his dad had a certain kind of job where he had to move a lot.

"Yeah, yeah, I know the type," said Jessica. "You know, sometimes I think those jet-set career guys should just do the world a favor and stay single. They put their families through hell." Then she flapped the covers and resettled them. "Sorry, I just farted."

"Thanks," said Patty, laughing.

"You wait until you grow up and get pregnant – I'm telling you. It does stuff to your digestive system that you don't even..."

"Eew!"

"Okay, forget it. We were talking about you, right?"

Patty was stunned for a second. She tried to imagine what she'd do if Gloria ever said that – *let's get back to talking about you*. She'd probably faint from astonishment.

“Tell you what I think,” said Jessica, “you just have to show him that you aren't going to give up. That *you* know how to write a letter, even if he doesn't. You know, all kinds of kids your age have pen pals. And that can be a lot of fun – writing back and forth.”

Patty sighed. She wondered if she could ever explain to anyone what it was about Johann. She wondered if she could even explain to herself. She tried to imagine what life would look like with him gone. Like something crushed under a bulldozer. Then for some reason, she started thinking about the Alateen meeting, and their weird prayer at the end.

“Jessica, what was that thing you were saying about the Alateen prayer? About *accept the things we cannot change* and all that?”

“Yeah, accept the things we can't change. The other part is to change the things we can. Then you pray for the wisdom to know the difference.”

“Between the two kinds of trouble, right?”

“That's right. The kind of trouble we can do something about, and the kind we can't do crap about.”

“So what kind of trouble is this? With Johann?”

“His name is Johann? Is he German?”

“He's...um...mixed. But what do you think?”

“Only you can answer that, I'm afraid. I wish I could tell you, kid. I really do. But it seems to me that you like this kid enough so that it would be silly to just give up on him. Just because he's scared, I mean.”

“You think that’s what it is? He’s scared?”

“Oh, hell yeah, honey. That part’s obvious. I don’t even have to lay eyes on him to know that. Boy’s just on his way to being a man, is all.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean -- they don’t change much,” she laughed. Then she rolled over, her voice muffled under the quilt. “That’s what I mean.”

Patty stared at the ceiling and listened to Jessica’s breathing until it became slow and regular. Then she said it to herself:

*God, grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Which kind of trouble is this, God? The first kind or the second kind?

She was still asking when she fell asleep.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

The notes crept into her dream, and at first it was part of the dream. She saw the fields of sun-warmed timothy grass, the farmers cutting it, heaping it by soft pitchforkfulls into haystacks, the blue overalls of the blond shepherd boy, the sheep dotting the hillside. The notes wrapped themselves around her, bringing her up into the

daylight, the sun warming her face, Jessica's window curtains drifting in the morning breeze. Patty sat up in her sleeping bag, and the song was still playing. A tinkling of little metallic harmonies, the song strange but at the same time, completely familiar. It seemed to open up a door into a million dreams she'd had and forgotten. She should know the song – know the words to it, even, but she couldn't form them on her tongue. She got up and followed the sound. As she entered the hallway it was louder, and even louder at the top of the stairs.

It was coming from the living room.

She followed the sound downstairs, and discovered where it was coming from. The old black music box on the shelf by the door, the one her great-grandfather had brought from Germany, the one Johann had tried to fix.

The sun hadn't made its way into the living room yet – it was still dimmed with that flat, gray, just-before-sunrise light, where nothing casts a shadow. Patty walked slowly towards the box, then put her hand on it, afraid it would stop as soon as she touched it. It didn't.

She lifted the heavy wooden lid. The tones opened up as she did, the vibrations spreading through her fingers. She'd heard other music boxes, she'd even had a few of her own. Her favorite had a ballerina in a pink tutu who spun endlessly to *Strangers in Paradise*. But she'd never heard anything like this. She never knew a music box could sound so full, could have all this *music* in it. She was hypnotized.

Who had started it going?

She turned the box over and looked underneath it. She touched the key that had been stuck so hopelessly in place, like the sword in King Arthur's stone. It twisted easily

now. She set the box down on the shelf again and took a step backward. Gradually, the song slowed and slowed until it was just plink here and a plink there, like a baby falling asleep. Then it ended. Patty picked up the box and wound up the key. The music burst out again, this time a different song – one that Patty had never heard before.

Three more times she wound the key and each time a different song came out. The last time she did it, it went back to the first one. Johann had been right – it did play five songs. It was the most amazing music box in the world.

It was fixed. Completely, totally fixed.

“Bob?” Patty asked to the empty room.

“Was it you? Did you fix our music box?”

Patty listened, but the only sound was from the birds outside the window.

“Because it doesn’t seem like something the Ghost Lady, I mean, Alice, would do.”

Still no sound. Patty went to the kitchen. The morning light was coming through the back porch. Mimi the cat leapt up to the place where she always came in – to a window about seven feet off the ground where the glass pane had fallen out of the small frame years ago. She dropped down onto the porch floor and meowed at the door.

Patty let her in and fed her. Then she wrote a note for Jessica or David or whoever got up first, that she had gone out to a friend’s house. She hurried upstairs and got dressed, then wrapped the music box in a brown paper bag and left.

It was almost an hour later when she rang the doorbell at Johann’s house. The buses were so slow on Saturday. It was a good thing, actually – it wouldn’t be good to be too early. Even so, it took a while before she heard a noise inside. Long enough to ask

herself again if this was the right thing to do. She still didn't know – still didn't know which kind of trouble this was. It was like her feet and her hands had their own plan, and she was just following along. She wasn't even sure what she was going to say to him yet. But he had to know about this. He had to know that Bob had fixed the music box.

The sound of locks unlatching, then the face of Johann's mother in the doorway.

“Why Patty! Good morning, dear – what are you doing out and about at this hour?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Van Hout, is Johann up yet?”

“Not yet, dear – but come in, why don't you? I'll make you some breakfast.”

Patty couldn't help noticing the boxes in the corner of the living room. Already some things packed away. It made her sick in the bottom of her stomach, so she pretended she hadn't seen.

At their kitchen table, she devoured toast and jam and sipped a cup of hot tea with milk and sugar in it. She hadn't even thought about how hungry she was until she smelled the toast. Johann's mother chatted to her about the weather, school, all the regular grownup things. Nothing about moving to California. Did she think Patty didn't know? If she didn't bring it up, Patty sure wouldn't. After a while, Mrs. Van Hout excused herself to go upstairs and wake up Johann.

Patty's hand gripped around the music box in its brown bag. The whole time, she'd had it on her lap, under the table, hoping it wouldn't attract attention. It was so big she needed both hands to pick it up. After a while, she heard footsteps on the stairs, but smaller ones. Then Johann came into view, on the bottom step, his hand holding onto the

banister. Stopped, like he couldn't go any further. His hair was messed up and he was wearing a baggy blue t-shirt and pajama bottoms. Patty didn't move from the chair.

“What are you doing here?” he said in a flat, empty voice.

“I think you forgot something.”

“Forgot what?”

“To say congratulations. Everybody else did.”

Johann rubbed his eyes with both hands and peeked through his fingers, as if trying to see if Patty would disappear – like maybe she was a figment of his imagination. Of course she wasn't, so she didn't.

“Congratulations,” he sighed. “Are you serious? That's why you've come? I thought you hated sports and all that stuff. You told me--”

“No, dummy, that's *not* why I'm here.” Patty was starting to get mad, now. Had she expected him to be happy to see her? Maybe not – but maybe she actually had. Maybe just a *little* bit, even she did catch him by surprise. But he didn't even seem the tiniest bit happy to see her.

But still, she had come this far. She stood up, holding the box in the bag. He looked at it and wrinkled his forehead. He glanced once up the stairs.

“Come on,” he said. She followed him up the stairs, into his room. Patty unwrapped the music box and handed it to him.

“It's fixed . It started playing this morning, all by itself.”

Johann's mouth dropped open. He turned the box over and twisted the key slightly. He looked at her, his eyes two blue flames. “but how--”

“How do you think? Bob comes back to the house, and suddenly things that have been broken forever are fixed?”

“So -- they’re both still there.”

“Still there? They’re more *there* than ever. No thanks to you, since I don’t have you to help me with them anymore. It’s just us and them, and they’re taking over.”

“But...how could Bob--”

“The point isn’t *how*. The point is, *you* gave up!” Patty pointed to the box. “*Some stuff just can’t be fixed* – that’s what you said, remember? Well, you were wrong. Bob just proved you were wrong.”

Johann opened the lid of the box and looked inside.

“So you know what I think?” Patty said, taking a step towards him. He started to take a step back, then his foot just kind of stuck in the air, like some kind of confused water bird.

“I think maybe if you were wrong about that, you might be wrong about other stuff, too,” she said. “Like maybe when a *real* friend promises to write you a letter, they *will* really write. Or that maybe leaving town doesn’t have to mean goodbye forever. Maybe even *dying* doesn’t mean goodbye forever. It sure didn’t for our new roommate.”

“Roommate? You mean Jessica?”

He was acting so stupid, Patty would have pushed him down if he hadn’t been holding the music box.

“Uh, the invisible guy? Who likes Nat King Cole? The one with the handyman skills? Remember?”

“Bob,” Johann almost whispered it. He turned the music box over in his hands, stroking the lid of it.

“Yeah, Bob,” said Patty, quieter now.

“Patty – if you think this is going to change my mind--”

“Will you turn the key?”

“Patty, why did you even come--” his voice was cracking, his blonde lashes blinking back tears.

“Will you just turn the key, dang it?”

He exhaled and twisted the key. From inside came the solid, healthy purring of hundred-year-old gears. Then the song burst from the box, rich, full, mysterious.

Johann’s lips fell open. He cradled the box to his chest and looked into it. His mouth began to move along with the music.

“You *know* it?” Patty asked.

He nodded. “We had a housekeeper – she was like, my babysitter -- in Germany. She used to sing this song around the house.”

They listened together, Johann working through the complex German words, mouthing them silently until the song slowed down and faded.

“It plays four more. Just like you said.”

He looked up at her, and something was burning behind his eyes.

“You said nobody could fix it,” she reminded him. “You said it was hopeless.”

He didn’t say anything.

“I came over to say that I don’t believe you anymore,” she said.

He looked frightened, suddenly.

“I don’t believe you when you say you don’t want to be my friend anymore. Because I think you do,” she said. “I don’t believe you when you say I’ll forget about you like your other friends did. Because I’m not like your other friends. And I don’t care if you move to another state, or another country, or another planet. There is no way – no way in a million, trillion years that I will ever, *ever* forget about you.”

He was crying now – crying for real. The tears were falling on the lid of the music box. The little painted German flowers were swimming under them.

“Go ahead,” she said. “It plays four more.”

Patty turned to go.

“Wait! Aren’t you taking it with you?”

“It’s yours.”

“Are you serious?”

“It’s your going-away present.” She headed out the door and down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Johann followed her out the door and stopped at the top of the staircase.

Patty wanted to turn and run back to him, to grab him with both arms and never let go, but she stopped herself. Instead, she used all her muscles, every ounce of her strength to take three more steps down. That was the bigger Patty inside, the same one that wouldn’t let go of the bar during the arm-hang. Then she stopped and turned around.

“To catch the bus?” she said. She hadn’t meant for the question mark to come out, but it did.

“No. Don’t.” Tears were streaming down his cheeks when she turned to look at him. He was holding the music box like it was his life preserver. “Aren’t you going to listen with me?”

Patty’s heart did a dance in her chest. “You mean it?” she said.

He sniffed loudly. “Yah.”

Patty walked back to him. She let him hand her the box, and he wiped his face on his t-shirt, then she wiped hers on her sleeve. Then they sat down on the floor together, their foreheads almost touching, and he wound up the key again.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“I’m not gonna be the only one in the family who’s stuck at home with a babysitter while everybody else is at the play! I’m not! I’m not I’m not I’m *not!*” Sarah yelled it all the way into her room and slammed the door.

“You won’t understand it, dummy! It’s not a kid’s play!” Todd yelled after her.

“I’m not a *kid!*” Sarah screamed through the door. It was the kind of scream usually described as “blood curdling” in the detective magazines that Patty used to read in the grocery store news section while waiting for her mom to finish the shopping. Before she went into rehab, that is.

“I don’t know, Ted,” said Lorraine, lighting a cigarette and sitting down at the kitchen table. “She seems so upset – I didn’t expect it. She hasn’t said a word about wanting to see the play until now.”

“Hon, it’s only because we’re all going but her. She doesn’t want to be left out is all.”

“It’s hard being the youngest,” said Patty, spearing an olive out of a jar with a fork. Lorraine and Dad stopped and looked at her.

“Well, it *is*. I should know, right?”

“But Ted. Demonic possession. Persecution. Burning at the stake.”

“Don’t forget pressing.”

“Pressing?” said Patty.

“It was a way of torturing people to death. Will you close the refrigerator door, please, instead of just standing there? Thank you. See, they would place stones on the condemned, one by one, until they —”

“Ted!”

“Well, it’s going to be in the play – she might as well know now!”

“Should Patty even be *going* to this?”

“No way am I not going!” Patty hadn’t meant to shout, but she couldn’t help it.

“She’s right, it wouldn’t be fair to David,” said Dad. “He needs supporters the audience. As many as possible.”

“Yeah! As many as possible!” Sarah shouted through a crack in her bedroom door, where she’d been listening. Then she slammed it again, louder.

“If we don’t let her go, she’s gonna torture *us* to death,” said Todd.

“Todd? You’re taking your sister’s side?” Lorraine was honestly stunned.

Todd looked down and shifted his weight to the other foot. He looked truly sorry, like he was passing up an especially excellent piece of chocolate cream pie. “No, I just don’t want to listen to her whining about it for the next year.”

So they all piled into the VW van, then took their places on the hard wooden seats of the West High Auditorium, Patty sitting next to Sarah. The entire place was lit up in that dizzying excitement of School At Nighttime. The whole place seemed to be packed into that one giant room, teachers, parents, little brothers and sisters, voices bouncing off the towering high ceiling, higher than any room in Patty’s school. A lot of the kids looked almost like adults. It was weird thinking about David going here every day. Weird to think that she had no actual idea of what he did here every day in this big, serious building.

Sarah kicked the seat in front of her until the lady in it, somebody’s mom, turned around and gave her a dirty look. Patty grabbed Sarah’s knee and told her to stop. Sarah turned to her, surprised. She’d been so excited she didn’t even know she was doing it. She folded and unfolded her play program, looking at all sides of it, but not really reading it.

“So it’s about people getting possessed, right?”

“Right.”

“Like in *The Exorcist*, right?”

“Right. Except no green puke. And nobody’s head is gonna be spinning around, okay?”

“But it’ll still be good, right?”

“Of course it will be good,” said Dad, leaning over in his seat. “But if you don’t understand what people are saying, remember, it was your idea to come. We told you it wasn’t a kids’ play. So no asking questions.”

“Why can’t I ask questions?”

“Honey,” said Lorraine, and she was getting those pinchy lines around her mouth again, “we explained it in the car. Because you’ll disturb the audience members.”

“But *I’m* an audience member!”

Patty leaned over and said, “Okay, listen. You are allowed to ask me exactly three questions. Okay? But *only* three, and *only* if you whisper.”

“Just three?”

“Just three. Like Aladdin and the Genie. Got it?”

“Those were wishes.”

“Shut up!” said Todd from the other side of Lorraine.

“I wasn’t talking to you, buttface!”

But now everyone had to shut up because the lights were going down.

It was amazing, the play. It took a long time before David came on, but when he did, he was good. He was a boy in the town, a town that had all gone crazy against some girls who, as far as Patty could tell, were just faking being possessed, not the real thing. They were especially corny about it in the courtroom.

“Why do the girls keep talking about the black lady?” was Sarah’s first question.

“Cause they don’t want to get blamed. They want *her* to get the blame for being the witch, not them.”

“What a bunch of bitches,” Sarah whispered. Her whisper wasn’t really all that quiet. The lady in the seat in front turned around again. Patty shushed her.

The girl playing the black lady -- with the fabulous name of Tituba -- was actually black. Patty was impressed. It meant that David had actual black kids at his school. She did an accent that made her seem exotic. Patty felt sorry for Tituba. It was pretty obvious why she was the scapegoat. Linda had taught her that word earlier that week. It was a great word. Scapegoat. Patty had written it about fifty times in her notebook.

The townspeople seemed very stupid – like they would believe anything. Even when the girls in the courtroom all grabbed their throats and writhed and spun around like they were being strangled by invisible hands. David was great, jumping up and down and pointing and yelling, “witch! witch!” At one point, it seemed like just about everybody in the town was either possessed, accused of being possessed, or accusing somebody else of being possessed.

“Why did she suddenly change her story?” Sarah whispered about the lady with the soothing name, Rebecca Nurse.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t? Do I get a free question now?”

“No.”

The ending was very sad. A lot of people went off to the gallows to be hanged who hadn’t really done anything. The others, the worst thing they’d done was to tell some lies and be mean to each other. They reminded Sarah of Tammy and her friends. She couldn’t imagine anyone sending them to the gallows, but it was an interesting idea to consider.

“Did the stupid people win?” was Sarah’s last question. She had been pretty good, actually. Paid attention all the way through, and she’d stuck to the three question agreement.

“It looks like it,” said Patty. “It seems like the stupid people win a lot, just in general.” In the end, they all applauded especially hard when David and the other townspeople bowed.

As they made their way towards the exit, Patty’s eyes fell on a red-haired girl shuffling out of one of the back rows. Her face was totally familiar, but where had she seen her before? She wasn’t in their school – although she was just about the right age to be in eighth grade. Then she locked eyes with Patty, and Patty remembered. The girl from the Alateen meeting. What did she say her name was? Ellie? Elsa?

“Ellen?”

The girl looked around quickly, but seeing that the people she was with, two older girls, had already made it out the door, she waved at Patty and smiled.

“You don’t go to this school, do you?” Patty asked.

Ellen leaned over and whispered in Patty’s ear – “We’re supposed to be anonymous, remember?” She looked around the faces at the auditorium, trying not to laugh.

Patty was sincerely confused. “What does that mean? Am I supposed to pretend I’ve never seen you before?”

“No, just – like, we met at the park, okay? At a softball game or something.” She was still whispering.

“But I hate softball,” Patty whispered back. It was starting to feel pretty ridiculous. Like they were two spies who were really bad at their jobs.

Now Ellen was laughing for real.

“You’re just going to have to pretend, okay? No, you’re right, I don’t go to this school – my cousin does. He was in the play. I’m here with my sisters.”

Sarah was looking at them, burning with curiosity. Lorraine, Dad and Todd were already outside at the front entrance; Dad lighting Lorraine’s cigarette.

“No parents?” Patty asked.

“No, my Uncle and Aunt are backstage already, congratulating him. Whatever. But my sister Jen just got her driver’s license so she’s all nuts to drive everywhere now, so we just came, the three of us.

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah, I’m not complaining.” Ellen looked at her shoes, then up at Patty. “I was hoping to see you again, after that first time, you know.”

Patty looked around. Sarah was still staring at them and seemed to be trying to decide whether to go up and introduce herself. This would not be a good thing.

“Sarah, why don’t you go out front and wait with the rest of them? Tell them I’ll be there in one minute.”

Sarah, both insulted at being dismissed from the scene, and honored to be given an important message to carry on behalf of Patty, stomped off under the weight of this complicated load of emotions.

“I don’t know, Ellen. I don’t know if Alateen is my thing. It was...I don’t know...”

“Weird? Uncomfortable?”

“Yeah. All that.”

“It’s supposed to be.”

Patty hadn’t expected that. Ellen was looking her straight in the eye now, one little side of her mouth curling up in a smile that Patty wished she could do. A smile that showed she knew a secret, or a trick of some kind.

“I don’t know...” Patty said again, feeling really lame, now.

“It’s okay. Whenever you’re ready. It’ll be great to see you.” She made it sound like it was *going* to happen. Like it was just a matter of time. Who *was* this girl, anyway?

“I gotta go find my sisters now. Good to see you, Patty.” She waved once, a little finger-wave, turned on her heel and headed out the door.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gloria would be back that weekend. She had a new boyfriend. She had told them on the phone about him, a guy she had met in rehab. They were going to go through recovery together.

“He collects dogs,” she said on the phone.

“Dogs?” said David.

“He has six! Can you believe it?”

Apparently it was okay, though, because he lived an hour away, out in Sun Prairie in a house with a giant yard for them to run around in. He had rescued them from

animal shelters and car accidents. She said she was going to be spending a few weekends out there with him.

“But I miss you guys so much. I can’t wait to see you. You mother’s a whole new woman!” And she really did sound happier.

A new boyfriend. Patty knew it shouldn’t matter to her, but the news was like a twisting, living thing inside her stomach. It was still there after she hung up the phone, and still there as afternoon slipped into evening. What if she hated him? What if he was crazy? With six dogs, he could be anything. She wanted to go into her room and shut the door and think about it, but Jessica insisted on organizing them to clean up.

“Now, when she comes back,” said Jessica, “we’re going to have to make sure there’s no booze in this house – anywhere. So if you think there’s any place she could have hidden some, say so now, so we can pour it down the drain.” They weren’t sure, so they went on a search through all the rooms of the house, but Patty didn’t think hidden booze was the main problem.

“How is she supposed to come home to this place the way it is now?”

“What do you mean, the way it is now?” said Jessica. She turned on the light in the room that had been Dad’s study. Nobody had been in there in weeks. The bulb flickered like a disco light then popped out, smoking.

“Knock it off, Bob!” Jessica yelled, “I’m running out of money for lightbulbs, for Chrissake!”

A stack of Roladex cards tumbled off the top of the bookshelf and fluttered to the floor like fall leaves. Some fell in Jessica’s hair. She swatted them away, cursing.

“Hey, maybe he thought that’s what you meant by *knock it off*,” said David.

“Ha! So you believe in him now?” said Patty

“Did I *say* I believed in him?”

“You said *him!*”

“Doesn’t mean anything.”

“Does, too!”

“I ain’t picking those up – my belly’s too big,” said Jessica stepping over the mess of cards.

Patty began picking up the cards while David went through the closet of the study to see if any bottles were stashed away. “What’s Mom gonna do, coming back to the house all crazy like this? How’s she gonna sleep at night? We can’t.”

“I can,” said David.

“You could sleep through a nuclear war,” said Jessica.

“We have to do something,” said Patty.

“And what do you suggest, Ms. Physical Fitness?” said David. “Challenge them to a wrestling match? Or a relay race?”

“Shut up.”

“Shut up, *buttf*ace. You forgot *buttf*ace.”

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At school the next day, Patty presented her idea at the lunch table. Johann was back eating with them again. Everybody was trying to be extra nice to him because of him having to move. Heidi even gave him the pudding from her lunch box. Everybody was amazed at the generosity of it, because it was like something only Jesus would do, until they realized her mom had given her two by accident.

“So what I’m thinking is, if we have a kind of ceremony. All four of us talk to the ghosts together, and see if we can get them to calm down and get the house back to normal before my mom comes home from the hospital.”

“Why don’t we just ask them to leave?” said Heidi.

“There’s a lot of ways to do it,” added Johann.

“No,” said Patty. “I don’t want to.”

She couldn’t throw the ghosts out now. It was wrong. They had saved her mother’s life, tried to protect her from the jocks, to protect Jessica from Rick. They had fixed the music box -- and she was pretty sure that if it hadn’t been for them, Johann would still be sitting by himself at the corner table moping right now, instead of eating with them. Whether she liked it or not, they were part of the family.

On the other hand, they had to do *something*. If Gloria came home to a house full of misbehaving ghosts, she might not want to live there at all. It might make her so nervous, she’d think about drinking again. She could even decide to move in with Mr. Dog Man.

“Well, okay, but what exactly do you want us to *do* in this ceremony?” asked Linda, pushing her glasses up on her nose.

Patty thought about it. It was delicate. “Well, I want them to feel like they’re welcome. It *is* their house, after all. I mean, it was theirs first, before it was ours. But they have to be peaceful and quiet and not do anything to freak out my mom, because she’s going to need things to be as regular as possible when she gets back. So, I’m thinking we could do a ceremony to make them stay in the attic. And do... I don’t know -- quiet activities.”

“You mean like knitting?” suggested Heidi. Johann had to put his hand over his mouth to keep the pudding from spraying out. Linda was laughing, too. It was pretty funny, actually. Knitting ghosts.

“Don’t ask me about which activities. I just want them to stop messing with the lights and the TVs and radios, stop knocking stuff off the shelves, stop moving our stuff around...”

“They’re doing all that?” Linda asked. For once, her eyebrow hadn’t gone crooked in that way of *I don’t believe you but I’m too nice to say it*.

“Duh? Are you even listening? That’s what I’ve been trying to say, Linda! It’s what our whole life has been like for the last two weeks. Now do you want to help or not?”

“Of course I’ll help – there’s no reason to get grouchy.”

“Sorry, but ghosts can make you grouchy.”

“Especially when they keep you up at night,” added Johann helpfully.

Patty looked at him and that awful thought came again, of what the world was going to be like when he was gone. She pushed it away. She couldn’t think about it now.

On the day of the ceremony, Johann came over first. They chose a Sunday night during another performance of David’s play, so the house was quiet. Downstairs it was just Jessica, doing the dusting and listening to Bob Dylan albums. The house was cleaner than it had been for a while, because of all the work they’d been doing to get it ready for Gloria. Maybe if she saw how perfectly clean and beautiful it was, she’d never want to drink again.

Patty and Johann were cleaning, too, only up in the attic.

“It worked the last time,” said Patty. “when it was just the Ghost Lady. I mean, Alice. Making this little room for her, I mean.”

“But it’s the both of them now,” said Johann. “You need to make it bigger. Maybe put a few more of their things in here.”

They decided to expand the space to make it one third of the attic. They re-hung the clothes line to re-mark the ghosts’ territory, and dug out more curtains to drape from it end to end to make it official.

“Now everything we put in this section should be from the stuff that belonged to them, so they know where they’re supposed to be,” said Johann. He was a genius. Why hadn’t Patty thought of that before? The room she had made had mixed stuff in it, the ghosts’ stuff and the Lofthouses stuff. No wonder the ghosts were confused about where they belonged. She found all the stuff that didn’t belong to the ghosts and carried it to the other side of the clothesline.

Johann and Patty opened up the boxes in the corner that had been there since they’d moved in. They picked out Bob and Alice’s (or maybe Bob and Ida’s?) stuff – old china cups and table cloths, souvenir statues and picture postcards, and one by one, decided where each thing should go. They kept the table with the lamp on it, but took out the rocking chair, because it had belonged to their grandma. Besides, it made noise. They put in two of Bob and Alice’s old dining room chairs next to the table instead – ones that Patty’s parents had decided were too ugly to use, but they looked perfect next to the table. They put in the old baby cradle and filled it with throw pillows and a knitted scarf that looked half-finished.

“Maybe they really *will* knit,” said Patty. Johann laughed.

On the walls, they used thumbtacks to put up the old postcards and travel brochures from their vacations, and their friends' vacations. On one side of the wall they hung a funny-looking wooden mask with dried grass for hair that Johann said looked Polynesian. On the other side, they hung a gigantic wooden spoon and fork, two feet long, with hooks on the back, perfect for hanging. These seemed to go with the mask, somehow. The bare attic walls had a lot of boards sticking out that were like little shelves, and on these they put sea shells, paper weights, trophies, and two fancy brass platters with squiggly writing around the edges that neither of them could figure out. Absolutely everything had belonged to the ghosts when they were alive.

“But some of this stuff might be from his second wife. What if she gets jealous?”

Patty suddenly worried.

Johann put his hands on his hips and blew a cobweb off his forehead. He clearly hadn't thought of this. After a while he spoke.

“Do you remember what it said in the obituary? The newspaper article? About when she died?”

Patty thought about it. It was nineteen sixty-something, she remembered that much. She had to run downstairs to ask Jessica, who had the obituary in stuck a drawer someplace. It was good that she ran down at that moment, because Heidi and Linda had just showed up. Jessica had poured each of them a glass of Orange Crush and they were sitting on the living room couch, petting Jinx.

“Hi guys! I gotta find out something, then we'll all go up to the attic, okay?” Patty ran to the kitchen to ask Jessica about the obituary then ran back.

“So, she’s not like your cousin or anything?” Heidi asked, after Jessica left to hunt down the article.

“Well, she’s *like* a cousin, but not technically,” said Patty.

“When is the baby coming?” asked Linda.

“Four months, I think.”

“She’s really nice.”

“And pretty, too.”

“I like her southern accent,” said Linda.

Heidi stroked the velvet of Jinx’s ears, which always made him sleepy for some reason. Jessica returned with the article. Patty looked at it.

“Okay, it was 1966. Let’s go upstairs -- Johann’s waiting.” She handed the article back to Jessica.

Heidi and Linda looked at each other, trying to figure this out, but Jessica hustled them out of the room.

“Go on, Patty’s got a plan. You kids leave your glasses down here.” Patty could hear her laughing to herself as they ran up the stairs.

Their first job was to look at the date on all the postcards they had thumb-tacked to the walls and make sure none of them were after 1965, since she had died in January, 1966. This kept everybody busy for a while, because there were a lot of postcards, and they were old and hard to read.

“I guess for the other stuff, there’s just no way to know,” said Johann.

“So we’ll just leave it,” said Patty.

“Do you really think ghosts can get jealous?” asked Heidi, who seemed doubtful.

“If you hear a brass plate flying across the attic one night, you’ll know,” said Linda.

Patty had told everybody to bring a housewarming gift. Linda brought a book, of course. Shakespeare’s sonnets, which she insisted would keep the ghosts quietly entertained for hours.

“They’re very romantic, too,” she added. “I can recite three of them by heart--”

“That’s okay,” said Patty, hurriedly.

Heidi brought a backgammon set that she’d gotten for a Christmas present, but had barely even taken it out of the box, because she already had one. Johann had his gift wrapped mysteriously in a brown paper bag. He unwrapped it with great care, kneeling on the floor. It had to be something amazing.

“An Etch-a-Sketch?” Patty couldn’t believe it. How lame could you get? A stupid plastic screen to draw with, using two knobs. The Etch-a-Sketch was probably the stupidest thing her parents had ever given her. It was supposed to keep her and David entertained all the way from Wisconsin to their cousins’ house in South Dakota, year after year. Just looking at its plastic screen brought back queasy car-trip feelings. She hated the way the two knobs only made a line in two possible directions – horizontal or vertical. It was like having a humorless math teacher in the car with you for eight hundred miles. The only good thing about it was the feeling when you shook it upside-down to erase it, and the picture became perfectly blank again, like a field of gray snow. Whatever idiotic, cube-y failure of a drawing you’d made, you could wipe it out in an instant. No evidence. Like it never happened at all.

“Isn’t that thing actually a children’s toy?” Linda said, crossing her arms in front of her.

Johann stood up, holding the red plastic board to his chest. “Have you considered the possibility that the ghosts might one day get bored with Shakespeare’s sonnets?”

“I’m assuming they’re grown-ups, and like to do grown-up things.”

“And when that gets old, maybe they’d like to have a bit of fun?”

“That’s what the backgammon is for!” Heidi protested.

“I mean *creative* fun.”

“Oh, yeah. *Creative*,” said Patty, putting the word in quotation marks with her fingers.

“Why not just give them a box of crayons and paper?” Heidi asked.

Johann rolled his eyes like he was talking to a bunch of morons. He held out the Etch-a-Sketch to them so they could see it clearly.

“Look – two simple knobs. See? Easy to operate when you’re a ghost --well, maybe not easy, but *possible*. Like a television or a stereo,” he said, looking pointedly at Patty. Then he turned back to Heidi. “*Crayons*? First of all, they would melt into goo on the first hot day up here. Secondly, how are they supposed to operate crayons? They’re *ghosts!*”

Linda got that dawning look on her face like she was just about to decode a series of hieroglyphics. “So, you’re saying it’s easier for them to manage a mechanical device than to pick up a tool and draw or write with it?”

“I’m saying its bloody near *impossible* for them to pick up a tool and draw or write with it. You have to think of it from *their* point of view. They aren’t made of matter, they’re made of energy.”

They all thought about this for a while. Linda was shaking her head and looking at the floor, as if trying to figure out what to say back to that. Heidi looked down at the backgammon set she was holding. “Does this mean they won’t like my present?”

Johann sighed. “I don’t know. They’ll probably appreciate the thought.”

Patty’s gift was something she’d thought about for a long time. (It wasn’t easy, thinking up gifts for dead people.) It sort of broke the rules, because it definitely made a sound. But it wasn’t a loud sound, and she thought they might like it.

“But that’s *your* music box,” said Johann, recognizing it. “Didn’t you say you’ve had it since you were eight years old?”

“But it plays *Stranger in Paradise*. That’s probably a song they know, because they’re old. My mom said it was popular when *her* mom and dad were young. And it has a ballerina that spins around. I bet the Ghost Lady – Alice, I mean, would like it. I know they like music. And it just seems sad that they don’t get to have a radio or stereo.”

“Why don’t you get them one? Like a radio with a battery?” said Heidi.

“Duh – because maybe she’d like to sleep at night?” said Johann, who was still mad about the Etch-a-Sketch.

“Yeah, that’s the last thing they need,” said Patty.

They assembled all the presents on the rug in the middle of ghosts’ room. Absolutely everything on that side of the curtains had been theirs – even the curtains

themselves. And now the gifts would be theirs, too. They sat down in a circle, with the gifts in the middle.

“What do we do now?” asked Linda.

Patty wasn't quite sure. She was figuring everything out as they went along. It was a lot like art class, on one of those days when the teacher decided to make everyone practice freedom, and would hand you a bunch of cut-up pieces of cardboard, cotton balls, tempera paint and glue, and said, here – use your imagination!

“Well, I think we should all say something to them,” she said. “Something like, welcome to your home--”

“And please stay in it,” added Johann. Linda and Heidi laughed nervously.

“Each one of us should say something, one at a time,” said Patty. For some reason, that seemed right.

“What should we say?” asked Heidi.

Patty looked at Johann. He was thinking, too. The room began to darken as the sun sank behind the railroad tracks. A few patches of orange light still decorated the ceiling beams. Finally, Johann spoke.

“I think we should each give our gift to them, tell them why we got them what we did, and tell them what we hope they'll do with it,” he said. He sounded sure, and that was good enough for Patty. Heidi cleared her throat.

“So, like, here's a backgammon set, and I got it so you could--”

“Let's all take a minute to practice it *silently* to ourselves first, and then we go one at a time, okay?” said Patty.

They all held hands around the circle for concentration. Patty went first.

“Bob? Alice? If you’re here, first I want to say thanks for everything. Thanks for chasing away the jocks the night they came to toilet paper the house. Thanks for warning us about Jessica’s creepy ex-boyfriend. Thanks for helping get my mom to the hospital, and thanks for fixing the music box.” Linda and Heidi opened their eyes, looked at Patty and then at each other. They hadn’t known all these things.

“But I have to say that now that my mom is coming home from the hospital, you guys really need to settle down. Alice, I know you’re happy to see Bob, and you’ve been waiting a long time. Bob, I know you’re excited, too, but I don’t know if you guys really understand how much trouble you’re causing. Bob, you’re a tall guy and you have big, loud feet. But it’ll be okay if you just stay in this part of the attic. That means stay out of the rest of the house, especially once my mom comes home -- that’s Gloria, the one with the glasses.”

Patty paused for breath. “And Alice, if you stay in this part of the attic, too, that will make it easier for Bob.” Then she opened the little white music box, and the ballerina popped up. She was on a little spring, so she folded down when it was closed.

“Okay, so the present I got you guys is this music box. I know you know how to work a music box, because you played the one downstairs, even though it was broken for, like, a million years. So, this one isn’t an antique or anything, but it has a ballerina, which the other one doesn’t, and she even has a pink tutu, if you notice the details. And it sounds really pretty. You can play it as much as you want. It’s totally okay.”

Everyone waited to see if she would say more, but she was finished. They went clockwise around the circle.

“Okay, my name is Linda, and I feel a little odd doing this, but my present is a book of Shakespeare’s sonnets, which are considered some of the best poetry in the entire English language, in the history of the world. So, (and here she took a breath and steadied her voice) if it’s true that you have been reunited in the afterlife because of your love, which I think is totally romantic, these poems would be really nice to read out loud to each other.”

“*Quietly,*” whispered Johann.

“Yes, quietly. Read them *very* quietly.”

Linda jostled Heidi to let her know it was her turn.

“Oh, uh...hi. My present is a backgammon game. Backgammon is a really old game, actually. It was invented by, um... I think the ancient Egyptians...”

“*Persians,*” whispered Linda.

“The ancient Persians. And it looks easy but it isn’t. It’s a game of strategy... and... you guys can play it as much as you want. Just maybe don’t throw the dice too hard.” She let out a frustrated sigh. “Sorry, that was completely stupid.”

“No, it was great,” said Patty. “Okay, next.”

Johann straightened up and tightened his grip on Patty’s hand. He kept his eyes closed.

“My gift, even though people here think it’s stupid, is a modern invention called an Etch-a-Sketch. If you liked drawing while you were alive, either one of you, you might want to try moving the knobs on this thing and making pictures with it. Left for vertical, right for horizontal.”

“*Tell them how to erase, too,*” whispered Heidi.

Johann did.

“And by the way, we don’t think it’s stupid,” Heidi added.

They remained silent for a while, continuing to hold hands. The room had grown darker while they were speaking, and the only sound in the air was their breath going in and out. Patty never noticed before how much sound came from breathing. She became aware of a pressing behind her, that feeling she would get when she sat in the windowsill of in an empty room in the house, the feeling like there was somebody behind her. Johann’s hand trembled in hers, and she snuck a look at him. He was squeezing his eyes shut, trying to hold still. The heat of the afternoon drained out of the room, and Linda and Heidi opened their eyes and saw goosebumps rising on their arms.

Four bottoms jumped an inch off the rug at once when the first note plinked from the music box, then another. The ballerina began to turn, her tiny, pink-slippered foot cutting a pirouette through the air. Three times around, while the melody tinkled along, then slowed and stopped. Heidi’s fingers pressed so hard into Patty’s hand, it hurt. Linda was staring with her mouth hanging open. Johann was looking up at the ceiling, focused on something Patty couldn’t see. Heat began to rise from the floor again, and covered them like a blanket.

“What was that?” said Heidi, “What just happened?”

Linda looked at Patty, her eyes twice their normal size, and there was an apology in them. She shook her head slowly.

“I have no explanation.” she said.

“I think they like the presents,” said Johann.

“Yeah, when they aren’t happy, they knock things over,” said Patty.

Heidi scrunched over, closer to Patty, so their shoulders were touching.

“How long has it been like this?” she asked.

“A little bit ever since we moved in – but a whole lot since Bob died.”

“Do you think things will settle down now?” Linda asked, hugging her knees and looking around the attic.

“I guess I’ll find out,” said Patty. She almost said *we*. But Johann was leaving in two weeks. And he wouldn’t be there with her to find out if it worked or not. The thought made her stomach hurt, and for a few moments she couldn’t look at him. The last thing she needed now was to start crying in front of everyone.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

The gym was filled with the whole seventh grade class. There were kids from other gym classes who had been through the same competition, and eleven Presidential Physical Fitness awards to hand out altogether. Five girls and six boys. The girls sat along the east wall, and the boys along the west wall, everybody’s butts stiff and falling asleep on the floor. One by one, Mrs. Washerman called out the names of the girls, and Mr. Peterson called out the names of the boys. Each was handed a blue canvas patch with an eagle on it – the presidential seal – along with an official certificate on smooth, creamy paper. The friends of the lucky winners cheered them from the sidelines as they went up to receive their Presidential Physical Fitness Awards. The names were familiar to everyone. The popular kids, the top jocks: Tammy, Kristin, Larry -- there were no surprises. None, that is, until Mrs. Washerman called out Patty’s name.

When Patty got to her feet, the kids who had been cheering up to that point fell silent, but the gym erupted in a louder, wilder cheer, as Patty's friends were joined by the freaks, geeks, fat kids, slow kids -- basically everybody who hated gym class, hated the jocks, or both.

Patty's hand was crushed in Mrs. Washerman's sweaty grip of congratulations, and with the other hand, she received the patch, and then the certificate. She took a few steps back towards her seat, then stopped when she examined the stamped signature. The certificate suddenly became a poisoned thing in her hand.

"This is signed by Nixon," she said.

Mrs. Washerman put her hands on her hips, and for a second, Patty thought she was about to be sent to the locker room.

"Well, he *is* our President, Miss Lofthaus."

Patty looked at it again. Of course, she was right. Who else's signature would it be? But somehow, Patty hadn't expected to have something signed by Nixon in her possession. It made her a little bit sick. She wasn't somebody who collected autographs, but if she were to start, she would get John Lennon's first. She sure wouldn't start with pukey old Richard Nixon.

"He invaded Cambodia," said Patty, hoping this would explain things.

"Miss Lofthaus, that is quite enough! If you can't respect our President, perhaps you shouldn't be accepting this award!" Mrs. Washerman's face was turning red.

Patty thought about it. Kids on both sides of the gym were completely silent now, quieter than they'd been since the whole ceremony began, every eye stuck on her like chewed gum. She thought about napalm bombs, the burning goo that stuck to the skins of

Vietnamese kids, kids her age. She thought about how much it would hurt, worse than boiling water, worse than anything she could possibly imagine. She thought about the piles of dead Vietnamese people she'd seen on the TV news, those skinny little dead farmers, moms, barefoot kids. Kids even smaller than her. American soldiers pacing around with their big guns. She thought about Nixon's last speech, how he said the US couldn't give up now, how they had to defeat the communists. How could little kids and babies even *be* communists, anyway? What was he even talking about? She and David had turned the color knob to make Nixon's face green because it was the only way they could stand to look at him. "That's his true color, anyway," David had said.

Patty looked one last time at the certificate and then at Mrs. Washerman's scrunched-up eyes, staring into hers. Then she ripped it into pieces. Gasps and exclamations exploded from every corner of the gym. She almost threw the pieces onto the floor, but that would be littering. So she crumpled them up in her hand and walked back to her seat.

One pair of hands was clapping wildly, one unmistakable voice cheering, "hooray, Patty! *Amandla!*" from the other side of the gym. The boy's side.

"Patty Lofthaus and Johann Van Hout, *both* of you, to the principal's office! *Now!*" Mr. Peterson roared.

Heidi and Linda stood up and cheered them from the sidelines as they left, setting off a round of louder cheers from the freaks and geeks. They called out her name from the sidelines, many jumping to their feet with fists in the air. Patty tossed the pieces of the certificate in the wastebasket by the door.

“That was brilliant!” Johann yelled, he was practically skipping as they made their way down the hall, silent and empty now, with everybody at the ceremony. They could still hear Mrs. Washerman and Mr. Peterson trying to quiet everybody down.

“What are we even gonna *do* in the office?” Patty asked. “The principal’s in the gym with everybody else.”

“I don’t know – who cares?” said Johann. “It can’t be any more boring than that stupid ceremony.”

They sat on the wooden chairs in the principal’s waiting room playing Rock, Paper, Scissors while the secretary shot them dirty looks from her desk. The sunlight was coming in from the window just perfectly and Patty wanted it to last forever.

“Hey, what was that thing you yelled in there?” Patty asked.

“What thing?”

“Back in the gym. That word. Sounded like a girl’s name. Just before Mr. Peterson creamed you.”

“*Amandla*,” said Johann.

“Amanda? Who’s Amanda?”

“Not Amanda, *Amandla*. Means freedom. It’s what we say in South Africa – at the protests.”

“You mean like, “*one, two, three, four, we don’t want your dirty war?*”

“Sort of. Only we go like this: When I say *Amandla*, you say *Owetu*.”

“*Owetu?*”

“Yah, exactly. Okay – now: *Amandla!*”

“*Owetu.*”

“Not like that. Louder! *Amandla!*”

“*Owetu!*”

“*Amandla!*”

“*Owetu!*”

Johann got out of his chair. “Now put your fist in the air like this – *Amandla!*”

“Children!” The secretary stood up. “Be quiet! In case you have forgotten, you are in detention!”

Patty and Johann sat down and tried to stifle their laughter, practically falling off their chairs.

When the principal finally showed up, it was weird, because even as he lectured them from across his desk about respect and courtesy at school events, the whole time his lips were twitching at the corners like he was trying not to laugh. He just kept running his hand over the strands of his hair combed from one ear to the other and slicked down over the bald part. As he tried to look serious, Johann and Patty tried to look sorry. It was like they were all playing parts in some weird little play. They got off with a warning.

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“I just can’t believe how nice the house looks,” said Gloria. She kept walking from one room into another, stopping to look at things, as if trying to remember what they were used for. All three of them had busted their butts cleaning for her arrival. What Patty couldn’t believe was how Gloria looked. She had lost at least fifteen pounds – all

that spongy, soft flesh around her neck and belly was gone. Her skin was smooth and clear. Her eyes brighter, like pebbles you find on the beach, just washed clean by the waves. She was actually pretty.

And the way she acted. Stopping between sentences to look around her, like a traveler in a foreign country, studying things, checking the map every few minutes to make sure she wasn't lost.

“So how are things at school?”

“It's almost over. Can't wait for vacation,” said David. He was trying his best to sound normal, but his eyes kept shifting over her, watching and waiting.

They were all sitting around the living room coffee table, drinking iced tea, which felt weird, considering it was almost winter now, almost all the leaves gone from the trees. Gloria kept twirling the ice cubes around in the glass.

“I got all kinds of bebies in the fridge,” said Jessica. “You gotta have nice things to drink. So I got three kinds of juice, club soda, Schwepps Tonic, lemonade...”

“Thanks, honey. You're a doll,” said Gloria.

“What's your t-shirt mean?” asked Patty. She'd been trying to figure it out. Tight and baby blue, with fakey gothic letters, saying “Easy Does It.”

“Oh, it's something we say in AA. Just to remind us not to be too hard on ourselves. I mean, it's hard enough staying sober each day without all the whining and moaning and self-punishment, right? Everything doesn't have to be a damn Wagner opera all the time.”

Jessica laughed, showing all her shiny white teeth. “Man, I missed you.”

Patty wished she could be like Jessica. It was so easy for her to love Gloria. Of course, Gloria wasn't *her* mom.

There had been no way to tell, during the month that Gloria was away, what changes were happening to her. From the weekly phone calls, Patty had listened for changes in her voice, something to tell her whether it was working - if Gloria would really stop drinking forever. Patty tried to prepare herself. Prepare herself either way - trying to remember that girl in the Al-Anon meeting whose dad had gone into rehab three times. Jessica had talked to her about how important it was to be extra nice to her mom, to thank her for every little thing, to be *supportive*, that was her word. Patty even had little supportive phrases memorized in her head; "you're doing great, mom! Keep up the good work!" So when the day finally arrived for Gloria to come home, Patty thought she was ready for anything. The one thing she hadn't expected was that this whole new person would be coming home. That without the booze, her mom would have a different personality. Would she *like* the new Gloria? What if it turned out she didn't?

A big part of the difference was just in the look on her face - the way she seemed to both see and *not* see everything around her. Piles of things seemed to make her nervous. She didn't want to look at the stacks of mail that had piled up, for instance. She spent about fifteen minutes on the second day, starting to go through it all, then scooped it all in a pile and shoved it in the roll-top desk and closed the cabinet door over it. Then she went to her AA books and sat down and read them.

She spent a lot of time with those books. Patty sometimes snuck a look inside of them when her mom wasn't looking. One thing that stayed in her mind was a whole part that said "we're not like other people, people who can drink socially;" that they were

“powerless over alcohol,” and that they couldn’t even have one sip of wine or a drop of beer because they would be right back where they started again before they knew it. It made Patty heart pound in a way that she didn’t like, so she skipped the rest of that chapter.

There were also a lot more slogans along with *Easy Does It*. There was *One Day At A Time*, and Gloria liked to say that one a lot. When Patty asked her if this was for real, if she really was going to follow the AA rules, and not drink even one single sip of alcohol for the whole rest of her life, that’s what her mother said.

“One day at a time, sweetie.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we can’t think that far ahead. It’s too much. It’s like you’re trying to climb a mountain, and keep looking at the top to see how much farther you have to go – it just freaks you out. I just have to concentrate on today. Just staying sober *today*. And if every day, I wake up in the morning and say, my job is to stay sober *today*, then there’s never more than just one day I have to worry about. Get it?”

Patty got it. But there was something tight and weird in her mom’s expression. It was like the look she got whenever she was close to the edge of something high. Gloria was always afraid of heights, way more than anyone else in the family. And she knew it was silly, too, her fear. So whenever they got close to a ledge, a balcony, the edge of a high staircase, she’d get this stretched-face smile, as she tried so hard not to look down, not to completely lose it.

Alcohol must be some huge, powerful thing if it was that hard to just go through just one day without it. And that part of it Patty really *didn’t* understand. Gloria even

showed them the bottle of pills the doctor had prescribed. It was called Antabuse -- a pill that would make you horribly sick if you took even a few sips of alcohol. Make you throw up until you felt like you were dying. Patty didn't like thinking of her mom having to take a pill like that. She asked David what he thought.

"I guess if it keeps her from drinking, it's a good thing," he said. They were talking quietly up in his room with the door closed, because now it seemed, Gloria could hear better than before, although how that could be, Patty couldn't figure out.

"And what else is gonna keep her from drinking?"

"I don't know. I guess those meetings she goes to."

"She says everybody eats just donuts and drinks coffee and smokes a whole lot of cigarettes. And they sit around talking about how hard it is not to drink. I don't get how that's supposed to help."

"Well..." David was lying on the bed, tossing his football into the air and catching it, looking at the ceiling. "I guess I don't know, either."

"Maybe they know how it works in that other group -- you know, the one for the kids. Alateen."

"Well, you can go ask them," he said. "Tell me all about it."

"Would you come, too?"

David laughed once, like an air explosion -- *Ha!* Then tossed the football so high it hit the ceiling. "No freakin' way. You couldn't get me in there if you set my ass on fire."

"Why not?"

“No, the actual question is *why*. Why would I? So I can come back spouting slogans and wearing stupid t-shirts?”

“You liked her better when she was drunk?”

David rolled over onto his stomach and looked in her eyes. His smile disappeared.

“That’s not what I said. It’s just – meetings and feelings and slogans, and junk like that...it’s not my thing. You can go if you want.”

And Patty could have gone, if she’d wanted, because Gloria handed her a pamphlet that had a schedule of meetings on it, and said any time she wanted to go, just say so and Jessica could drive her. In a month or so, Gloria could drive her, because she was taking driving lessons now.

Gloria went to the YWCA to use the pool three times a week. She was also going to job interviews, and seemed to be very close to getting a position in the mayor’s office, leading a city committee for school nutrition programs. Patty watched as muscles appeared in her mom’s legs, as the newspapers she read every morning over coffee and cigarettes stacked up in the corner of the dining room. As she spent every night on the phone talking to her new AA friends, to her political friends, to everybody in the world, it seemed. Gloria had a mission – to get back in the world, and find a job.

Patty had secretly been hoping that part of Gloria’s mission would be to start cooking again. Her dinners had always been so fabulous. Even the sandwiches she made had something special about them. But Gloria seemed to have forgotten about that part of her life. It seemed she had more and more to do outside of the house. She was spending every weekend at the boyfriend’s house, the dog collector in Sun Prairie. He had been over a couple of times. He had a big belly and long hair down to his collar, but bald on

top. He had a nice smile, but wasn't even a little bit handsome. He wasn't even all that smart. He looked at the books on the bookshelves and just kind of shook his head, like he couldn't believe they had so many. Patty tried not to show she was disappointed.

"What is she even doing with that guy, anyway?" she asked Jessica one night while she was helping her make dinner. Jessica had just sort of taken over the cooking since Gloria had lost interest. She didn't seem to mind, though. She said it was her way of paying rent.

"Sweetie, it doesn't always make sense from the outside, what makes folks tick, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what she sees in that guy. Sure, he's no Robert Redford, and he's not clever like your dad, but he's sweet to her. That much I can see. And he's in recovery too, so they have that in common. Maybe they can help keep each other sober."

Patty didn't say anything. She wished Jessica hadn't mentioned her dad.

"What if it doesn't work?" Patty said.

"What if what doesn't work?"

"What if she doesn't stay sober?"

Jessica was silent. She stirred the mashed potatoes.

"Honey, I don't know what to say to that. There's no promises. I'd be lying if I said there was."

The one thing that was working out well, better than Patty had even hoped for, was that the ghosts had been quiet. No action anywhere in the house, not even a peep from them. Jessica even mentioned it on third day, asking her what she and her friends

had done up there to chill them out. Patty thought about telling her about the séance and the gifts and everything, but it seemed like something to keep quiet about. At least the details.

“We just asked them to be quiet, is all. You just have to ask nicely. They aren’t that much different from living people.”

And that was mainly what she was figuring out. All anybody really wanted was for people to be nice to them. It didn’t matter whether they were even alive or dead.

Patty tried to remember that when Mr. Dog Man came to get her mom and drive her away in his pickup truck. Patty was cleaning her riding boots because Dad would be coming later that night to take her to the stables. There wasn’t enough time to put away the whole operation – the saddle soap, the cottage cheese container of full of soapy warm water, the brush, the chips of yellowish horse manure scattered on the newspaper in front of her – before Gloria let him in. Topy was having a conniption because there were four dogs in the back of the truck, jumping around, tails flapping. Gloria threw her arms around Dog Man’s neck, kind of bouncing off his giant belly, which was stuffed into a Chicago Cubs t-shirt.

“Hey, Steve!” As Gloria kissed him, Patty made sure to focus on scrubbing the heel of the boot she was holding.

“Hey Sugar. I thought we’d go to Boyd’s for dinner tonight. They got a nice prime rib, whaddya say?”

“You just get paid or what?” Gloria patted his cheek. Ugh.

“You said it, babe! Oh, hey there, little lady. Got herself a project there, huh?”

Patty nodded.

“Patty? You going to say hello to Steve, or what?” Gloria said with just a hint of that you’ll-be-sorry-if-you-don’t tone.

“Hi Steve. Yeah, I’m going riding later,” said Patty, not looking up. Why did he have to sound so dumb? She tried not to look at how he’d done his hair into the world’s skinniest ponytail with a rubber band. Dang, if your hair’s almost gone anyway, what’s the point?

“Well, come on, beautiful, time’s a-wastin!” he said, helping Gloria on with her coat.

“Be careful on those horses tonight, sweetie, and don’t wait up! I’ll be back in the morning.” Gloria came over and kissed Patty on the forehead. It was so much nicer being kissed now that it didn’t come with a wave of stinky booze-breath.

“I won’t,” said Patty.

And that was actually the best thing. She *wouldn’t* wait up. She didn’t have to stay up listening for Gloria now, wondering when she was going to get home. As long as she was spending the night out in Sun Prairie and both of them weren’t drinking, there was no reason to wait up listening for her mom to come home. Patty could actually sleep.

Even the ghosts seemed to be able to sleep now. Or at least they were being quiet at night. Whether they were playing backgammon or drawing on the Etch-a-sketch, Patty wasn’t sure. She wasn’t about to go up to the attic to check any time soon. She thought about leaving some of their broken things up there to see if Bob might fix them the way he’d fixed the music box, but ended up changing her mind about it. Why get them all excited again?

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Dad's car pulled up in front of a brick house fronted by a wrap-around sun porch, now fitted with storm windows. Juniper bushes dusted with the first winter snow lined the walkway.

"Well, what do you think?" he said.

David unrolled his window and leaned his arms over the sill to get a better look.

It was smaller than their house. But it had an upstairs – you could see that part. And looking down the driveway, you could see the garage had a backboard and hoop, so that was a big plus.

"Did you notice the real estate sign?" Dad prompted.

Patty looked. A white placard was slapped over it with red letters saying "SOLD."

"You *bought* it?" both Patty and David said in unison.

"We bought it. Or I should say Lorraine bought it. But we're going to split the mortgage payments. We're moving the first of July. And you guys can help!"

He said it like it was a special treat, helping him pack and lug boxes. Wind rushed through the few remaining dead leaves of an enormous tree overhead, a tree Patty now knew was an aspen.

There was a kitchen with a butcher-block counter island in the middle, which Lorraine was incredibly thrilled about for some reason. There was a fireplace, a big living room and small dining room, but best of all, three bedrooms.

“Now they can have sex as loud as they want with the door *shut*,” Sarah said, not quietly enough, as she and Patty carried a box up the stairs filed with Sarah’s troll collection.

“I heard that, Miss Sarah!” Lorraine called from downstairs. She was up on a ladder, hands were covered with Plaster of Paris, from filling in cracks in the ceiling.

“And the best part,” said Todd, struggling under a giant crate, “is my room isn’t next to anybody’s. I got the other side of the hall!”

“Which is good for everybody, because now they don’t have to smell you,” added David, who was refusing to handle anything that belonged to Todd. He was stacking boxes marked “bedroom” into what would be Dad and Lorraine’s room. Patty joined him to check out the view from their windows. From there, you could see the lake, already some sailboats out in the middle.

“Not bad,” David said, almost to himself.

“Our place is better,” Patty whispered.

David was looking far into the distance, way on the other side of the lake to where the town was a different town. He didn’t answer or even shrug his shoulders or anything. It was like Patty hadn’t spoken.

David did agree to help Sarah and Patty carry up the parts to Sarah’s bed, which Dad assembled and Sarah immediately started jumping on.

“I’m gonna love it here! I know it, I just know it!” her head was coming dangerously close to the ceiling on each jump. “And I get to go to a different school, and I don’t have to take the bus, and we can go fishing in the lake whenever you want!”

Patty didn’t have the heart to tell Sarah that going to a different school wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. She remembered the excitement of a new house, a new neighborhood. Hopefully, Sarah would have an easier time.

It was too late for planting tulip bulbs, but Dad had managed to find some gladiolas that would bloom in pots on the sun porch in mid-January. He was always thinking of stuff like that – what could be stuck in a pot to bloom just when you most needed something to cheer you up. Patty helped him get the papery, garlic-like bulbs into the pots. He had a little bag of fertilizer, too, and a measuring scoop – one scoop for each bulb.

“I heard in school that the Indians used to put a dead fish in the ground under every seed when they planted corn,” said Patty.

“The Indians were smart. Fish is full of nitrogen.”

“If they were so smart, how come we got all the land?” Patty wanted to know.

Dad pressed the soil down and wiped the dirt off his hands.

“Don’t you ever ask any *normal* questions?” But he was smiling. He looked happy, actually. Happier than he had in a long time. He was always happy when his hands were covered with dirt, sticking plants in soil, or pulling them up. But he seemed even happier than that, now. Patty tried to smile with him, but it didn’t work.

“You okay, kiddo?”

“Yeah.”

“Anything wrong?”

How was she even supposed to answer that? What was the way to talk about it? The feeling of seeing somebody move off, away from you. Finding a happier place than the place they were in with you. Patty knew it wasn't her fault. She was grown up enough to know that she hadn't made him leave. It was his smile that hurt. The fact that he looked so *happy* about it. Why couldn't she be happy for him? And of course, the answer was, there wasn't any answer. There wasn't any way to talk about it. And now, with Johann leaving in just two more weeks, there was no doubt about it – this was going to be the suckiest Christmas ever.

“Something wrong?” Dad said.

“I don't know... My stomach hurts.”

“Probably from hunger – it's almost dinner time. What do you say we all head out for fried chicken tonight? It's your favorite, right?”

He was right. Patty managed an actual smile this time, and he took her dirt-streaked hand to help her to her feet.

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The snow came a lot thicker after the first week of December. It was always that way, like the weather had to be reminded about the calendar -- that November was gone and it was winter now. Once it started, it didn't want to stop. It swirled into drifts, covered the rooftops, slicked over the sidewalks. It crusted itself into the windowsills, muffling sound, dampening the air, turning the light bluish in the evenings, which came earlier and earlier every day. The cold settled in earlier than usual, too. Kids at school disappeared under thick scarves, shielding them from face-scouring below zero winds.

Johann's teeth chattered as they walked back to his house after school. He had two ski caps on his head, giving him a double case of hat-head, making his hair fly up in a static electric panic when he took them off. Even double-layered, he was still practically blue with cold as they walked.

"I guess you don't get winter back in South Africa, huh?" said Patty.

"No, we do get winter. It gets cold. It gets *bloody* cold in Johannesburg, in fact. but what we don't have is *this*." He spread his arms out, encompassing the blinding white streets, snow-draped houses, icy sidewalks, frozen trees. "This is – it's... I can't even think of what to call it."

"Snow?" suggested Patty.

Johann gave her such an irritated look, she had to laugh.

"But they have winter like this in Germany, don't they?"

"No – not in Hamburg. Not like this. I mean, there was snow, but not this much, and this bloody *cold* – damn, it's like it wants to kill you!"

Tomorrow was the last day of school before winter vacation. Christmas was exactly eight days away, and on the 29<sup>th</sup>, Johann and his family would be getting into the car and driving west. Patty was reciting these statistics to herself every day now, as the day grew closer and closer.

"I'm just glad there's no weather like this in Berkeley. My dad was talking to his new boss on the phone last night, and the guy said it was sunny and sixty degrees Fahrenheit. I can't wait."

It was like he'd punched her in the nose. Specifically the nose, because that's where she began twitching, as the tears sprang into her eyes, and her feet stopped dead in

the middle of the sidewalk, as he kept walking ahead a few more steps before he realized she wasn't walking with him anymore.

She tried to sniff quickly, as her nose began to stream, but on the sharp inhale, prickles of ice formed in her nostrils, making her nose twitch even more. She swiped at her upper lip with the back of her mitten.

“Patty? What’s the matter?” he said, like he really, honestly didn’t know. That’s when she started bawling for real.

Crying outside in the totally freezing cold is one of the most uncomfortable things a person can possibly do, so if you can at all avoid it – if you can hold it in until you get inside where the air temperature is no longer turning your tears and snot instantly to ice, then you’d better do just that. Unless you absolutely can’t help it.

Patty couldn’t help it.

It was like everything had come unraveled at once, and she had never felt so totally miserable and scared to be standing in her body, in her stupid winter coat from last year, when everybody else was wearing new NorthLand parkas with the real fur hood fringe. And there was Johann standing right in front of her, and her trying to imagine him in two weeks, gone, gone, gone. It was happening so soon it made her literally sick to her stomach.

“Patty?”

Her voice came out between sobs, squeaky and pathetic. “If you’re so anxious to leave, why do you even talk to me?” Even as she said it, she realized how babyish it sounded.

Johann rolled his eyes up to the gray sky, made as if he were about to walk away, then jammed his two hats down further on his head with his clumsily gloved hands.

“Patty -- I didn’t mean “I can’t wait,” like that. It’s not like I can’t wait to leave...you know, you guys, and... and everything, it’s just...”

“No, you *said* it. Don’t try to take it back now.” She really needed to wipe her nose.

“But you totally misunderstood me!”

“What if *I* said that? ‘I can’t wait. I can’t wait ‘til you leave?’ What would you do then?”

Johann stuck his hands in his pockets and his cheeks blushed red, despite his blue lips. “That would be totally different. And awful. And it’s not the same thing at all.”

“It isn’t?” She finally found some Kleenex and blew her nose and wiped her eyes. She straightened her back and brushed past him, leaving him standing there next to the frozen puddle. Why didn’t he get what a horrible thing to say that was? He should be apologizing right now, not trying to make excuses. Were all boys this stupid?

“This was *your* idea, you know!” he yelled behind her. She turned around.

“Your idea to keep being friends,” he said in answer to the question she hadn’t asked. “This is what I meant when I said it would easier to just call it quits. But you...you...”

“But I what?” she was still crying, but now part of her wanted to hit him, too.

He bit his lower lip and looked at his boots. Big, stupid, rubber-toed boots that make his skinny legs look skinnier than ever. When he finally released his lip so he could

answer her, she saw that it was trembling. Not from cold, either. Somehow, seeing that he was also about to cry changed everything. She found herself walking towards him.

He swallowed hard as she came to a stop in front of him, standing in the footprints she'd just made in the snow. His eyes were the bluest thing in the world. Bluer than ever, against all the white, now that all the color was gone from everything.

“You had to bring me that bloody music box,” he said, voice cracking.

Now it was his turn to brush past her, and walk on ahead. It was becoming a kind of dance. A really stupid kind of dance.

“So what do we do now?” Patty yelled up the sidewalk at him.

“We go back to my house and get some tea before we freeze our arses off!” he yelled, half turning around, but not stopping. “N’kaaaaayyyy?” he added, and Patty couldn’t help laughing then, even though her face was still stinging and chapped from crying.

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The school Christmas concert promised to offer more variety than ever, with a blend of traditional carols and some cheerful show tunes, and even a Hannukah song, in which Amy Rosenstein insisted that she get the solo part, because she was the only Jewish girl in the choir, even though she was totally off-key and everybody knew it. Johann got the solo part for the song from *Oliver*, *Be Back Soon*. So, after all the kids sang, *and when we're in the distance, you'll hear this whispered tune*, he had to pipe up, all by himself, *so long, fare thee well, pip-pip cheerio*. He did it so perfectly, it was scary.

You'd swear he was really Oliver Twist himself. You wanted to see him go up and ask for another bowl of gruel and everything. The teachers were totally in love with him.

Patty didn't get any solo at all, which was okay. She wasn't that into the Christmas concert, anyway. It was just fun to do something with all of them together, Linda, Heidi, Johann and Patty. At least one more time, before they were back to being just three.

As Mrs. Hinkle assembled them onto the steps of the stage, tallest kids in the back, shortest kids in the front, all the girls in their holiday dresses, and the boys in their black shiny shoes, Patty was trying to figure out what felt different. It wasn't that she was nervous about the performance, even though both her dad and her mom would be in the audience – seated on opposite sides of the auditorium, and that was going to be totally weird, but that wasn't it. She looked around at the other kids, and Heidi gave her a wave from the soprano side of the chorus. She had washed her hair for the event, and pinned it back on the sides with red velvet barrettes. Linda looked pretty nice too, in a new blue sweater with little snowflakes knitted across the wrists. But that wasn't what was different. Then it hit her. It was Tammy, Kristin, Larry and Eric – all the jocks, in fact. They were looking straight ahead at Mrs. Hinkle. No whispering, no snide comments, no jabs in the ribs or snickers when any of them walked by. Eric even said hi to Johann and stepped aside to make room for him when he stepped onto the stage. And not in a snotty way, either – like he was actually saying hi. In fact, they got all the way through the rehearsal, all ten songs, and not one nasty look or crappy remark from any of them.

“Alright, boys and girls, that was wonderful! I think this will be the best Christmas concert yet,” said Mrs. Hinkle, clapping her hands.

“How about *holiday* concert? Can we just call it a holiday concert?” asked Amy Rosenstein.

“Dear, the programs have already been printed, but I promise we will see about that for next year. Cross my heart.” And she actually stood up and made a big Catholic cross over her giant bosom, which kind of defeated the whole purpose, Patty thought, but whatever. “And now you may all take a break before the audience arrives. But do not go far. It should be about twenty minutes.”

This time Patty watched for it. It would be the perfect opportunity. Mrs. Hinkle had her back turned, arranging her sheet music and making marks on the papers, not watching. But Tammy and Kristin and the rest of them were just talking with each other, comparing new shoes, new haircuts. Linda, trying to get to Patty, squeezed by Kristin and stepped briefly on her foot. *Okay, here it comes*, thought Patty. But Kristin looked up, her mouth set to launch into a bitchy remark, but as soon as she saw it was Linda, she shot a quick look at Patty and her face went blank. The she flipped her blonde hair back, and kept talking as if it hadn't even happened.

“Are you ready for the big night?” Linda asked Patty.

“Did you see that?” Patty whispered, pointing to Kristin.

“The jocks? So you noticed too?” said Heidi, sidling up beside Patty.

“What's with them? You suppose some zombie stole their souls?”

“Impossible. They don't *have* souls,” said Heidi, chewing a fingernail and eyeing them.

Linda pushed her glasses up on her nose and laughed. “You goofball, can't you see?”

Patty looked, but there was nothing to see. It was as if Heidi, Linda and Patty were a TV show that had been cancelled. The jocks had moved onto other entertainment. Larry and Eric were trying to pull the ribbons out of Tammy's hair and all the girls were shrieking about it.

"They're *afraid* of you, Patty. Since you ripped up the Presidential Physical Fitness Award."

"*That* scared them?"

"They didn't know what to make of it."

"It blew their minds," agreed Heidi, nodding solemnly.

"Okay, you're saying that being attacked by my ghost and chased by my dog wasn't enough to get them off my back, but me ripping up a stupid piece of paper in front of the gym teacher made them *afraid* of me?"

"It was the *way* you did it, Patty. You toppled the god they worship," said Linda, smiling in her completely Linda way.

"I was just trying to make a point. About how stupid the whole thing was. I wasn't trying to *scare* anybody." Patty shook her head. "I don't think I'll ever understand popular kids," she said.

"Who needs to?" said Johann, who stepped up just in time to hear this last bit of their conversation.

"Exactly," said Linda. "Let's just enjoy it, shall we?"

Dad sat with David at the show, and Jessica sat with Gloria. Lorraine and Sarah and Todd stayed home, thank God, or Patty would have probably had a heart attack on the stage, jocks or no jocks. Lorraine must have had some idea she and Gloria were not

ready to be in the same room together, or some kind of matter/anti-matter explosion would occur, like on Star Trek.

After the show, Gloria and Jessica came up and gave her hugs.

“Sweetie, I’m so proud of you. It was a wonderful show!” said Gloria. And that little blond kid you had over that one day, he was great!”

“I know, what a cutie, right?” said Jessica, winking at Patty. Patty felt her face turning red. She hoped to God Johann was nowhere within earshot. The only thing he hated more than being reminded that he was little was being called a kid.

“So, Jessica and I will be out in the parking lot, because your mother is dying for a cigarette, so we’ll meet you out there whenever you’re ready.” Gloria kissed her on the cheek, leaving a big smudge of lipstick there. Patty wiped it off as soon as the two of them were a safe distance away, and then Dad and David worked their way through the crowd to her.

“Great show, kid! You rocked the house!” said Dad, clapping her on the shoulder.

“I didn’t really do anything special,” she said. It was Johann who had stolen the show. And there his parents were, huddled around him, his mother holding him by the shoulders, kissing him over and over again, him squirming away from her and turning red. Teachers coming up to shake his hand.

“Aw, nonsense, honey. You were on key. You didn’t embarrass yourself. That’s success in my book!” and he nudged her in the side at her as he said it, and suddenly it all seemed so ridiculous. *Is this what it means to be an adult? Pretending all the time that everything is hunky-dory?* Her mother had just walked out the door without even

acknowledging her father's existence. Were they all just going to act like this a normal way to be?

But maybe it *was* normal. After all, for the one zillionth time, what did *she* know?

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*"Here's to a wonderful Christmas, and a New Year.*

*My promise:*

*Your mother will be full of e-n-e-r-g-y in 1978!"*

Patty read the card again – it had been stuck in the top of her stocking along with two comic books, and not the regular stupid Archie and Richie Rich ones, either, but good comic books. A Peanuts and a Pogo, both of which she hadn't read before. Maybe her mother really *was* getting better. She wondered about the dashes between each letter in the word "energy." Was it supposed to read like a cheerleading chant, or something? Gloria sure had gotten weird since she'd joined AA.

The rest of the stocking was the usual stuff. Chocolate bars, candy canes, a tangerine, (just to give it some old world charm, Patty imagined, feeling sorry for the kids in the 1800s who were lucky if they got an orange once a year.)

She wondered if Johann had a stocking in his house. She had forgotten to ask him. She knew South Africans had Christmas, but it was different. He'd told her that their seasons were completely backwards, so that December came in the middle of their summer, the hottest time of the year. It was normal for them to get presents like

surfboards, Frisbees and snorkels for Christmas. She wondered what his parents were getting him this year.

David was still in bed. It was pretty lame, sitting there by herself in the living room with her stocking, looking at the tree, the snow outside, waiting for the tea water to boil. That was something different. She now drank tea every morning, thanks to Johann. She liked the taste of it, the steam rising from the cup. She figured that even when he went back to South Africa, she'd probably still be doing it. He would leave this piece of himself with her.

She could see, just barely, the kids in the house across the street, their living room lights on because it was so overcast and gray outside. They were five and seven. A girl and a boy, jumping up and down on the couch, tossing their new toys at each other.

Had she ever really believed in Santa Claus? She tried to remember if she had. She must have, at some time. But as far back as she could remember, David had explained to her every year how it was scientifically impossible to get a sleigh to fly, no matter how many reindeer were pulling it, and that the rules of time and space (proved by Einstein, and you can't argue with him) made it clear that nobody could bring presents to all the children in the world in one night. How old was she when he first explained all that to her? Four?

But it wasn't a big deal. She hadn't cried or anything. Christmas hadn't been any less fun, just because they knew it was their parents bringing the presents and not the fat guy in the red suit. It didn't even make Santa less fun. Patty loved to make construction paper Santas, stuck with a dozen cotton balls to make the fluffy white beard. But it was

clear that he was just another make-believe guy, like God and Jesus, who also had beards, only Patty didn't get to do them in art class.

So, what was it really, that had made Christmas more fun before? And why was it getting less fun every year? It wasn't even that she missed her dad – after all, she and David would be at his new house later than day to see what Todd and Sarah got. They'd get some more presents themselves, and then have an early dinner, and watch *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* on TV, then back home with Gloria and Jessica for Yule log cake with chocolate frosting, which Gloria was making today. It was a double Christmas, really. So she should be happier than ever.

She looked at the presents under the tree, knowing already how many there were for her, but for once, she had no interest in going up and shaking them, poking at the soft ones, wondering what was inside.

*Whatever it is, it'll be a disappointment.*

The thought banged into her head without warning, brought everything to a stop. Did she really mean to think that? And what did it mean if she did?

But after all, it was like that last year, wasn't it? She had made a real effort last year to keep up the excitement, although she'd felt it slacking away even then. Some clothes, some mittens, a few games and toys. Whatever.

She looked at the blinking colored lights of the Christmas tree, growing weaker and paler, as the morning light crept into the room. There were no clothes under that tree that she could put on that would make her popular. There was nothing she could give to Johann that would make him stay in Wisconsin. No present she could give her mom to make her never want to drink again. And nothing Gloria could give Patty to make that

promise real, about being full of e-n-e-r-g-y in 1978. How many promises had there been, anyway?

A thundering of footsteps on the stairs shook her out of these thoughts and David leapt over the couch to the mantelpiece and ripped his stocking from the nail where it hung. His was stuffed with Spiderman and Batman comics.

“Cheer up, dorkface – it’s Christmas!” he said, whacking Patty over the head with his stocking.

“Damn! That hurt! What’s in that thing?”

“Umm, walnuts? In the bottom, I think?” he flopped down on the couch next to her, digging into the bottom of the stocking. Walnuts in the shell.

“Great. You probably gave me brain damage,” she said, rubbing her head.

“Maybe. But who’d be able to tell?”

She poked him in the ribs with her big toe, where she knew he was still ticklish, and he let out a satisfying yelp, squirming.

“Merry Christmas, butthead,” she said.

“Merry Christmas, frogbreath,” he said.

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The moving van was packed nearly to the ceiling with the Van Hout’s furniture. Patty helped Johann carry his boxes down the stairs and out the door, propped open with a brick, letting freezing cold air into their house, now echoing and empty. The cold felt like it had gotten into Patty’s chest. Every time she made the trip up and down those gray carpeted stairs she stepped over a memory. Johann racing up them to get the flashlight so they could explore the drainage tunnel. The two of them running upstairs to his room

after school to talk about a million things, their fingers sticky with orange marmalade. Johann creeping down the stairs in his pajamas on the day Patty brought him the music box that Bob had fixed. The day she told him she wasn't giving up. The top step where she had made him cry that day.

When he called her and asked if she'd like to help him on moving day, she almost said no. She didn't know if she could stand to see his house all empty. She didn't want to. But the thought of him packing up all by himself was worse. And she couldn't pass up the chance to see him one more time.

At least it was sunny outside. The sky was bright blue with snow still clinging to the black tree branches. The snow glittered like a million diamonds in their yard, and even Johann had to admit it was pretty. Maybe it would make him miss Wisconsin, Patty hoped. She thought about asking him if he thought he would. It was one of about a hundred things she thought about asking him. Things that just wouldn't come out of her mouth. Like she had a cork stuck in her throat. She could feel it there, a tight, hard lump that wasn't going away. Up and down the stairs a few more times, and it didn't take long before they got to the last box.

Then they both stood there on the curb, looking into the back of the truck, at the two moving men strapping down the furniture so it wouldn't jiggle too much along the way. Behind them was the family's Volvo station wagon, equally packed to the gills with everything they would need for their car trip to California. Johann's dad was giving instructions to the moving men in his strange, rolling accent, like Johann's, but not like Johann's. Leaning into the back of the truck was Johann's mom, pushing boxes together,

securing the fragile things. There was nothing for Patty and Johann to do but stand there, looking at each other.

“I, uh... I feel like I should give you something. Like a goodbye present, but...”  
Patty’s voice trailed away.

“It’s alright. I didn’t get you anything, either,” he said quickly. His eyes met hers for a second, flickered, then fell back to his boots. Then they were both looking at his boots. He wouldn’t be needing them soon. Patty wondered what he’d do with a pair of winter boots in California. Maybe give them to the homeless. That was silly. The California homeless people wouldn’t need them either.

After a few moments Johann’s mother’s voice, lowered almost to a whisper, interrupted their boot-staring. She placed a hand on Johann’s shoulder and crouched down to speak into his ear.

“Darling, if you want to go inside to say goodbye to Patty, you may. We’ll need to run the car engine for a few minutes before we start off.”

He looked up at her and nodded. They both went inside the house, now drafty from the open front door, and climbed the stairs to his room, one last time.

It was completely bare. Waiting for the next family to move someone into it. Patty’s throat tightened into a ball as she stepped inside. He turned to face her then, and it was almost more horrible than she could stand. The whites of his eyes were red around the blue. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. Then he wiped his nose on the back of his sleeve, reached into his pocket and gave Patty a folded slip of paper. She opened it. It was his name, along with an address in Berkeley, California, spelled out in his neatest, most careful handwriting.

“I’ll write you a letter,” she said, her voice choked and raspy.

“You’d better,” he said, swallowing hard.

“I’ll write you a million letters. I’ll write you so many letters you’ll get sick of them. You’ll see,” And the tears were rolling all the way down to her chin, now. And when she hugged him, she could feel the buttons of his spine through his winter coat.

They didn’t let go until the Volvo’s horn honked outside.

### Chapter Thirty

The funny thing was, it was Johann who wrote first.

It was a post card from Colorado. Patty found it on the dining room table when she got home from school. It showed some elk grazing and a snow-covered mountain range behind them.

*Colorado is almost as beautiful as Lesotho. (almost.) But it’s still too cold and snowy for me. Reading makes me get sick in the car, so there’s not much to do. Right now we are in a restaurant called iHop. You certainly give your restaurants strange names in this country. But it has eight different flavours of syrup for the pancakes, which is cool.*

Patty stuck it up onto her wall with a tack, loving how he spelled *flavor* with a u, just like in her Alice in Wonderland book. She wondered where Lesotho was. She had to get out the atlas and found it in the northern part of South Africa, crossed by a mountain range with the fantastic name of The Drakensberg. She would definitely have to go to South Africa one day, she decided.

There was one more postcard before Patty wrote her first letter.

*Dear Patty,*

*Nevada sucks! If you haven't been here yet, don't come. It is the most boring desert I have ever seen – totally flat and dead. Compared to this, the Kalahari is a good time. We don't even get to go to Las Vegas, because it is too far south, so there is nothing to break up the total boredom. Except I saw an eagle catch a snake yesterday morning, which was pretty cool. Since then, nothing, nothing, and more nothing. Bleh!*

Patty was working on her first letter to him when Jessica knocked on her door.

“Come in!”

Jessica's belly entered before she did. That was the way she came into rooms these days.

“Hey, kiddo. Want to come run a few errands with me?”

“Sure,” said Patty, always happy to do anything with Jessica, even though she suspected she was being asked along to carry stuff Jessica was no longer in shape to carry.

First stop was the bank, so Jessica could cash a paycheck. They got into the teller line together.

“You got a bank account, kid?”

“Me? No. I was kind of going to wait until high school. Why?”

“Well, that's my question, why? I mean, you can start one right now if you want.”

“Really?”

“At this bank you can. It’s called a junior passbook savings account. You don’t get checks. But your money collects interest, just like everybody else’s. Safer than a piggy bank.”

“I have totally outgrown piggy banks, for your information,” said Patty, a little annoyed.

Jessica laughed. “Okay, I admit it. Your mom put me up to this. I brought your birth certificate with me so we can set it up right now if you want. Plus this.” She handed Patty two twenty dollar bills.

“One from your mom and one from your dad. To get you started. But don’t blow it all at once. Remember it’s called a *savings* account.”

Patty’s mouth fell open as she held the bills.

“You know, the best way to get yourself motivated to save money is to have something special you’re saving up for,” said Jessica. The teller called next, and it was their turn.

It was easy, setting up the account. Patty just had to sign a form that Jessica had brought with her, already signed by her mom and dad. Quite the sneaky plan, Patty reflected, surprised that they had done all this without her catching on. The teller gave her a little book about the size of her hand to record all the deposits and withdrawals. She filled in the date and the amount of the first deposit, forty dollars.

“Do you have something *you’re* saving up for?” Patty asked Jessica.

“Well, now that you mention it, I am. I have some really good friends in San Francisco. They’ve been dying to see me, but I’m going to wait until the baby is born.

Then we'll both fly out there. I'm thinking maybe around the end of May. The weather will be beautiful."

"Wow, San Francisco," said Patty. "Is that anywhere near Berkeley?"

Jessica laughed, "Honey, Berkeley *is* San Francisco. I mean, it's right there. You can take a city bus to it." Jessica paused to take in the look on Patty's face. "You can come with me if you like. But you'll need to save up at least a hundred bucks. You may have to do some baby sitting. Think you can manage it?"

"With you? Just the two of us?"

"Three of us, kid! I'm gonna be two by that time, remember."

Patty threw her arms around Jessica's shoulders as best she could with the big ball of her belly in the way, and the two of them laughed together, drawing some stares from the customers in the bank line. They walked arm-in-arm out through the parking lot.

"Hey Patty!" she heard just as she was reaching for the passenger car door. Patty turned around and there was Ellen, the girl from the Alateen meeting. She was dressed in a dark green wool coat that set off her red wavy hair perfectly.

"Hang on a sec, Jessica," said Patty and ran up to her.

"Ellen! Wow. What are you doing here?"

"Well," she said with a glance over at Jessica. She lowered her voice. "Believe it or not, I was heading to the meeting. You uh... doing anything right now?"

"Jest doing errands with Jessica. But, I guess I could see if she needs me for anything else." Patty turned around, and Jessica, reading her mind, called out across the lot,

"Hey, if you want to hang out with your friend, it's cool."

“You sure?”

“Totally!” Jessica waved goodbye to them and got into the car. In a couple of months she wouldn’t even be able to do that. There was only so far she could keep pushing back the seat.

“Ready?” asked Ellen. Her eyes were almost as green as her coat. Patty wasn’t actually sure if she *was* ready, but Ellen’s smile was contagious. Patty found herself happy for the second time that day. Almost happy enough to take away the empty hole in her stomach. The place that was Johann’s.

Almost.

But sometimes, almost is good enough.

The two walked on together, making a double trail of footprints in the fresh snow.